

ESCALATION WITH IRAN: OUTCOMES AND  
IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. INTERESTS AND  
REGIONAL STABILITY

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HEARING  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND  
INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM  
OF THE  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
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## CONTENTS

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	Page
WITNESSES	
Karlin, Mara, Director of Strategic Studies, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies .....	8
Tabatabai, Ariane, Associate Political Scientist, Rand Corporation and Adjunct Senior Research Scholar, Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs .....	14
Pletka, Danielle, Senior Fellow in Foreign and Defense Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute Andrew H. Siegel Professor on American Middle Eastern Foreign Policy, Georgetown University Walsh School of Foreign Service27 .....	
APPENDIX	
Hearing Notice .....	50
Hearing Minutes .....	51
Hearing Attendance .....	52



# **ESCALATION WITH IRAN: OUTCOMES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. INTERESTS AND REGIONAL STABILITY**

**Tuesday, January 28, 2020**

**House of Representatives**

**Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, and  
International**

**Terrorism**

**Committee on Foreign Affairs**

*Washington, DC*

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10 a.m., in room 2172 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Theodore E. Deutch (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. TRONE. Good morning. This hearing will come to order. Welcome, everyone.

The subcommittee is meeting today to hear testimony on the impact of rising tensions between the United States and Iran, and on U.S. policy and interests in the Middle East, and on regional stability.

May I ask for unanimous consent for Representative Perry, who is a full member of the Foreign Affairs Committee to join us this morning?

Without objection.

I want to note that Chairman Deutch will be joining us late this morning.

I thank our witnesses for appearing today.

I now recognize myself for the purpose of making an opening statement.

There are a number of significant questions before us. First: Are the American people more safe or less safe after the killing of Qasem Soleimani? How will the Trump Administration's escalation and program of maximum pressure impact the U.S. interests and stability in the region? What are the explicit benchmarks and goals of the Trump Administration's policies toward Iran and Iraq?

As a member of this subcommittee, I have significant concerns about the administration's inability to answer these questions and communicate a coherent strategy to confront the Iranian challenge while avoiding war and keeping us safe. I have to say that we had hoped to hear from Secretary Pompeo about this in the Foreign Affairs Committee 2 weeks ago but he refused to testify. The Committee has invited him again to a hearing tomorrow and I sincerely hope he attends because our questions about U.S. actions against Iran get at some of the most fundamental issues of war and peace that come before Congress.

We are exercising our constitutional duty and I would imagine that, as a former Member of Congress, the Secretary understands that.

Soleimani was responsible for the attacks that killed hundreds of Americans and thousands of Iraqis, Syrians, and others. The careful plotting and planning he put into sowing death, destruction and chaos is absolutely reprehensible. There is no doubt that under his command, the Quds Forces' efforts to expand terror pose a direct threat to U.S. interest and American lives. However, the Trump Administration has failed to provide a coherent rationale for the strike that killed him. It remains an open question whether eliminating one threat is worth the consequences of this action.

The fact remains the American people have seen no evidence that killing Soleimani prevented an imminent attack against American facilities or personnel and no evidence of a discernable political plan for our policy toward Iran moving forward.

I do not want to ignore the implications for Iraq either. Before this situation escalated so dramatically at the end of December, Iraqis were taking to the streets to protest pervasive Iranian influence in their country. These protesters forced Iraq's leaders to take action, resulting in new electoral law and the resignation of Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi. The Iraqi protest struck me as a very real and passionate expression of a people who want to be free of undue Iranian influence. Instead, Iraq now seems to be the site of a proxy battle.

The administration's escalation has jeopardized our interest in Iraq, now that U.S. Military personnel are focused almost entirely on force protection against threats posed by Iran and its militia partners. Almost all of our counter-ISIS efforts in Iraq are paused. Iran would like nothing more than to force American civilian and military personnel out of Iraq.

Following the strike on Soleimani, the Iraqi Council representatives voted to end U.S. Military presence there. Last Friday, tens of thousands protested in the streets of Baghdad, calling for the expulsion of American troops and the largest protest movement appears to be splintering. I cannot stress this enough. This is exactly what Iran has wanted all along. It serves no one's best interest if our actions lead to a dramatic reduction in reasonable diplomacy, a resurgence of ISIS, and free reign for Iran and its proxies.

Finally, I would like to make the point, because I think this administration needs to be reminded, Congress has not authorized war with Iran. What we need now is a clear strategy. We should use this occasion to develop one that is based on collaboration between equal branches of our government and enjoys bipartisan support. In the long-run, this is more likely to make us safe, and strong, than the escalatory action that seemed to have taken over the last month.

I look forward to hearing from the witnesses and thank them for helping us understand the consequences of recent events in U.S.-Iran relations, their implications for the Middle East, and how the United States can best navigate this difficult path forward.

I now recognize the ranking member for the purpose of making an opening statement.

Mr. WILSON. Ladies and gentlemen, I am honored to be here today and thank you, Chairman David Trone, for standing in for Chairman Deutch. Thank you for calling this important hearing to examine what comes next for U.S. policies and interests in the Middle East after President Donald Trump's courageous game-changing decision to protect Americans by eliminating Qasem Soleimani, a merciless terrorist, who was directly responsible for the deaths of at least 700 Americans in the conflict that we have in the Global War on Terrorism.

Iran has been threatening the United States since taking the American diplomats hostage during the Islamic Revolution in 1979. This is not a secret. The regime chants death to America, death to Israel. These chants are not empty words. These are the followers of the Ayatollah announcing their intentions to the world and it is our responsibility, as protectors of the American people, to recognize that and respond, as needed, to defend American families.

I firmly believe that the attacks that Iran and its proxies have engaged in in the past year, and as recently with the missile attack yesterday, beginning with the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, and on to ballistic missile attacks of U.S. Forces in Iraq, attacks against the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, shooting down an American drone, and attacking oil tankers and oil fields, an attempted assassination in Washington all are hallmarks of the rogue Iranian regime's murderous conduct. These attacks will not stop, if they are left unaddressed.

President Trump's strike on Soleimani was a needed step to achieve peace through strength. Today, we will discuss what other steps are needed to bring stability to the Middle East. Even as Iran works to sow discord and chaos, we must continue the maximum pressure campaign. The sanctions against the Iranian rulers are working. The despots in Iran are desperate. Now is not the time to restore resources for tyrants to continue aggression in the region. Sanctions relief did not lead the authoritarians to moderate behavior before and it will not have that effect now.

Turning to Iraq, the United States must make it a priority to stand up for human rights accountability and meaningful government reform. For months, the Iraqi people have been expressing their democratic rights as guaranteed to them by the Iraqi constitution, protesting corruption in their government and Iran's interference in their country.

Gruesomely, these protesters have been slaughtered. Amnesty International says that over 600 people have been killed. It is our responsibility to stand with these protesters and defend their rights. That is why my colleague, Representative Tom Malinowski, and I have introduced H.R. 5376, the Iraq Human Rights and Accountability Act of 2019, which requires a State Department review to determine if certain popular mobilization forces and interior ministry leaders meet the criteria for imposition of sanctions pursuant to the Global Magnitsky Act Human Rights and Accountability Act.

The Trump Administration has courageously imposed sanctions on the PMF tyrants and made corruption designations. I know the administration will continue to take a strong stance on this issue

and I hope this committee will take up the Iraq Human Rights and Accountability Act.

Similarly, we must remain steadfast in our right—in support of the rights of the people of Iran, who have also engaged in peaceful protests against the Islamic Republic's tyrannical policies.

Later today, the full House will vote on a resolution Mr. Joyce and I authored to support the right of the Iranian people to protest.

In Lebanon, following months of popular protest of government corruption and inefficiency, a pro-Hezbollah government has taken over. This development is concerning for obvious reasons and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses how the United States should tailor our responses—our policies and response.

I thank the witnesses for their testimony. I look forward to their analysis and recommendations.

Thank you again, Chairman Trone, and I yield back.

Mr. TRONE. I will now recognize members of the subcommittee for 1 minute opening statements, should they wish to make one.

Representative CONNOLLY.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for having this hearing.

I just want to say that I think we have heard a lot of red herrings and false intelligence justifying the assassination of a foreign leader. However maligned an actor he was, and he was, is it going to be the policy of the United States to take out, by assassination, every maligned leader in the Middle East? Of course not.

Is it going to be the policy of the United States to take a unilateral action without consultation with Congress or allies and worry about the consequences subsequently? Are we going to lie about the justification for such actions, while we are at it?

That cannot be the policy of the United States in this region. It is not the proper action of a great power and, frankly, it has weakened the United States, not strengthened us. And unlike what Secretary Pompeo says, today is not a safer world. It is a more dangerous world after that action.

There should have been proper consultation, careful vetting, and a clear understanding of the import of this action. None of that happened and all of that flows from the disastrous decision by this President to walk away from our own nuclear agreement with Iran that was working. I know we will explore that in the hearing.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. TRONE. Any other members?

Mr. PERRY.

Mr. PERRY. Well, I sure thank the chairman and the ranking member for their indulgence of the U.C. of my time here.

I reject categorically the assertion that there is no strategic or tactical plan regarding the elimination of Soleimani from the battlefield.

The fact that the administration does not come out and tell Members of Congress or the world at large what the strategic or tactical plan is, it is appropriate that they do not. We do not tell our enemies what the plan is. And unfortunately, Congress and even some in the President's own administration cannot be trusted with that information not to give it to the world or our enemies.

This was not an assassination. And this individual was not a foreign leader. This individual was a terrorist wearing the uniform of a nation state that uses terrorism as statecraft.

I heard nothing from my colleagues on the other side when their President eliminated almost 4,000 people from areas outside the battlefield, terrorists that should have been eliminated. And the world is a safer place because they were and that is why we did not hear anything from either side.

And with that, I yield back.

Mr. TRONE. Without objection, all members may have up to 5 days to submit statements, questions, extraneous materials for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules.

I will now introduce our witnesses: Dr. Mara Karlin is the Director of Strategic Studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. She is also an associate professor at SAIS and a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

Dr. Karlin served the national security roles for five U.S. Secretaries of Defense, advising on policies, spanning strategic planning, defense budgeting, future wars, and the evolving security environment in regional affairs. Most recently, she served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development.

Welcome back to the subcommittee.

Dr. Ariane Tabatabai is an associate political scientist at the RAND Corporation and an adjunct senior research scholar at Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs. She is also a Truman National Security Fellow and a Council of Foreign Relations member.

Previously, she served as a visiting assistant professor of security studies Georgetown University, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, was international consultant for NATO, and held several positions for the Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

We also welcome back Ms. Danielle Pletka, a senior fellow in foreign and defense policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. Until January 2020, Ms. Pletka was the senior vice president of foreign and defense policy studies at AEI. Ms. Pletka holds the Andrew H. Siegel professorship on American Middle Eastern Foreign Policy at Georgetown University Walsh School of Foreign Service.

Previously, Ms. Pletka was a senior professional staff member for Middle East and South Asia Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

Thank you all for being here today. Let us remind witnesses to please limit your testimony to 5 minutes.

And, without objection, your prepared witness statements will be made a part of the hearing record.

Thank you for being here today.

Dr. Karlin, you may begin.

**STATEMENT OF MARA KARLIN, DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC STUDIES, JOHNS HOPKINS SCHOOL OF ADVANCED INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

Ms. KARLIN. Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today. This morning, I will be summarizing my written remarks, which I submit for the record.

As U.S.-Iran dynamics grow sportier in the wake of Qasem Soleimani's killing, there are three insights I would like to convey. First, U.S. strategy vis-a-vis Iran is convoluted and clunky. This administration has outlined its vision of a fundamentally different Iranian regime through its maximum pressure campaign. Yet, it has attempted this policy while simultaneously pursuing contradictory efforts. It has a national security strategy and a national defense strategy focused on great power competition. It pulled out of the nuclear agreement without any effort to lay the groundwork for a new deal. It promulgated vague, and contradictory, and ad hoc responses to Iranian aggression, from skipping tens of rungs on the escalation ladder by killing Soleimani, while confusingly lurching in the aborted response last summer, when Iran shot down a U.S. drone.

This confusing approach is read by the Iranians as feckless, by regional partners as fickle, and by other U.S. adversaries like North Korea, as presenting opportunities for mischief.

The latest escalation raises considerations like how and in what ways Congress should financially support adventurism absent strategy and how Congress can compel a coherent strategic approach to policymaking on the Middle East.

For those who question whether missile salvos by the Iranian military constituted the sum total of Iran's retaliation for the Soleimani killing, let me be clear. Though the timing and the target of future action are uncertain, there should be no doubt that further Iranian response is sure to follow. That response could look like attacks by Iranian clients, such as Hezbollah, against soft targets frequented by U.S. Military personnel or directly against U.S. diplomats or civilians.

Simply put, we have reached the end of the beginning of this escalatory cycle.

My second insight: The Middle East is moving along a trajectory that increasingly favors Tehran. In Syria, Iran is managed with support from Russia and Hezbollah to keep Bashar al-Assad in power. In Lebanon, the new government further empowers Hezbollah in Damascus. In Iraq, key constituencies are seriously reconsidering the U.S. Military presence. In Yemen, the Saudis and the Emiratis spent years battling the Houthis with little to show for it, besides horrific Yemeni losses and Iranian delight.

Across the region, Iran's clients are not only growing in capacity but also in capability. Furthermore, the Russians, not the Americans, have committed to consistent diplomatic offensives across the region. Not only do the Russians have a seat at the table in the Middle East, they increasingly are setting the table as well.

There are steps the United States can take to adjust this trajectory. Hezbollah and Iran would be overjoyed if the United States gave up on Lebanon. It is essential to watch, as the military and

the government sniff around for a new rapprochement, to ensure the military continues to tackle threats of mutual concern and to increase force protection for Americans in Lebanon. The United States should excoriate Lebanese leaders who further undermine Lebanese sovereignty.

In the Gulf, ratcheting down tensions is a shrewd move. Key Gulf States, like the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are seeking accommodation with the Iranians. We should also encourage an end to the Saudi spat with Qatar and urge the Saudis to find a path out of the Yemen war.

And above all, we should find a way to normalize the U.S.-Saudi relationship, rather than prioritize it.

My third insight: The United States must find a way to meaningfully deprioritize the Middle East. The key geopolitical challenge, going forward, is posed by China and yet, we remain trapped in Middle East purgatory. The overmilitarized approach to the region continues. At least 20,000 new U.S. Military Forces have been sent to the region in recent months, bringing the total estimate of U.S. Military personnel to 80,000, which comes at a time as our diplomatic presence is plummeting.

The administration's maximum pressure campaign is resulting in maximum focus on Iran and there are opportunity costs for doing so.

Going forward, I urge you to look at the following areas of concern: On strategy and execution, given that U.S. strategy toward Iran and the Middle East is convoluted, the administration should clarify what it is trying to achieve, why is it trying to do so, and, above all, how it will do so.

On the counter-ISIS campaign and coalition, given that the conflagration between the United States and Iran has imperiled the fight against ISIS and fueled discontent among some Iraqis, the administration should explain how it plans to rehabilitate the fight and Congress should deepen its consultation with key coalition members, especially the Iraqis.

A deal in disarray. Given that U.S. participation in the nuclear agreement, rather than considering ways to improve it, has resulted in the United States dividing itself from its fellow signatories, while Iran pursues its own agenda, Congress should help formulate pathways with partners to limit Iran's nuclear program.

And our regional presence and purpose: Given that for two decades the United States has overwhelmingly relied on a military approach to the region, Congress should consider how the United States can right-size its military posture and grow a more robust diplomatic presence.

As outlined today, there are no simple solutions. However, some steps are overdue in leading Middle East strategy in a more coherent and sustainable direction.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Karlin follows: graphics 4-8]

January 28, 2020

Testimony of Mara Karlin, Ph.D.  
 Director of Strategic Studies and Associate Professor  
 The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University  
 Submitted to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
 Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism  
 Hearing on  
 “Escalation with Iran: Outcomes and Implications for U.S. Interests and Regional Stability”

Chairman Deutsch, Ranking Member Wilson, and Members of the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today. The Committee’s leadership on these issues is essential, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share my expertise and to assist with your mission.

As U.S.-Iran dynamics grow sportier in the wake of Qassem Soleimani’s killing, there are three key insights I would like to convey:

**First, U.S. strategy vis-à-vis Iran is convoluted and clunky.** The administration has outlined its vision of a fundamentally different Iranian regime through its “maximum pressure” campaign. Yet it has attempted this policy while simultaneously pursuing contradictory efforts. The administration has promoted a National Security Strategy and a National Defense Strategy focused on great power competition with China and Russia. But moreover, its tactics for pursuing its objective with Iran lack a clear unified strategy as illustrated by pulling out of the nuclear agreement absent any effort to build a pathway or to lay the groundwork for a new deal while failing to effectively lead and mobilize an international coalition to pressure Iran. The administration has promulgated vague, contradictory, and *ad hoc* responses to Iranian aggression—from skipping tens of rungs on the escalation ladder by killing Qassem Soleimani while confusingly lurching up and down in the aborted response last summer when Iran shot down a U.S. drone. The United States’ overall confusing approach is read by the Iranians as feckless, by regional partners and European and Asian allies as fickle, and by other U.S. adversaries like North Korea as presenting opportunities for mischief.

There are crucial issues for Congress raised by the latest escalation between the United States and Iran. These include considerations like the extent to which the Executive Branch should notify Congress before or after meaningful uses of force, how and in what ways Congress should financially support adventurism absent strategy, and more broadly, the extent to which Congress can compel a coherent strategic approach to policymaking on the Middle East. For example, Qassem Soleimani had a proven record of harming U.S. interests in the Middle East over decades given his leadership of Iran’s regional activities. One cannot and should not underestimate the (warranted) vitriol that current and former national security policymakers have toward him. Yet it remains unclear *why* he was killed *when* he was killed and *where* he was killed. Another concern raised by this escalation is the trajectory of U.S.-Iraq relations. The counter-ISIS fight has been severely disrupted over the last few weeks as the Iraqis, among other coalition members, appear uncertain about cooperation, to say nothing of the very real force protection concerns for U.S. military personnel in Iraq that surged in the aftermath of Soleimani’s killing.

For those who question whether missile salvos by the Iranian military constituted the sum total of Iran's retaliation for the Soleimani killing, let me be clear: though the timing and the target of future action are uncertain, there should be no doubt that further Iranian response is sure to follow. We have reached the end of the beginning of this escalatory cycle. That response could look like attacks by Iranian clients such as Hizballah against soft targets frequented by U.S. military personnel or directly against U.S. diplomatic or civilian personnel across the Gulf or the Levant, for example. It betrays a fundamental misunderstanding to say Iran has been deterred from a further state military response; that is not Tehran's comparative advantage nor would it ever represent the thrust of its retaliation given the sophisticated and capable clients it has built around the region.

**Second, the Middle East is moving along a trajectory that increasingly favors**

**Tehran.** In Syria, Iran has managed—with heavy support from Russia and Hizballah, among others—to keep the despotic leader, Bashar al-Assad, in power. In Lebanon, the new government further empowers Hizballah and Damascus, and it is unlikely to take real steps to prevent the economy from further tanking or to address protestors' valid frustrations. In Iraq, key constituencies are seriously reconsidering the U.S. military presence. In Yemen, the Saudis and the Emiratis spent years battling the Houthis with little to show for it besides horrific Yemeni losses and Iranian delight. Across the region, Iran's clients are only growing in capacity and capability. It is worth recalling that the regime has always found ways to fund its priorities—such as building Hizballah in the throes of the 8-year war with Iraq—and will continue to do so. To be sure, domestic discontent inside Iran and in places like Lebanon are certainly unhelpful for the regime in Tehran as are the sanctions draining the Iranian economy, but overall, the trajectory is increasingly positive for Iran.

Furthermore, the Russians, not the Americans, have committed to consistent diplomatic offensives across the region. Russia has done a superb job positioning itself at the helm of key Middle East dynamics. Moscow is leading and convening — albeit in an irresponsible and ineffectual manner. Indeed, not only do the Russians have a seat at the table in Middle East affairs; they increasingly are setting the table as well. Doing so enables Moscow to portray itself as the preferable alternative to the United States. This almost surely will not be limited to the Middle East given the tenor of Russian revanchism in Europe as well.

However, there are steps the United States can take to adjust this trajectory and regain influence, particularly regarding Lebanon and the Gulf. Hizballah and Iran would be overjoyed if the United States gave up on Lebanon. The United States should maintain its involvement there, particularly the relationship with the Lebanese military, but must be cognizant that the new Lebanese government is disappointing. It is essential to watch closely as the military and the government sniff around for a new rapprochement, to ensure the military continues to tackle threats of mutual concern, and to increase force protection for American military and diplomatic officials in Lebanon. The United States should also be willing to excoriate Lebanese leaders who further undermine Lebanese sovereignty, such as Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil who personally facilitated Hizballah's increasingly broad-based political gains.

Across the Gulf, ratcheting down tensions is a shrewd move. Key Gulf states like the UAE and Saudi Arabia are seeking accommodation with the Iranians. The United States should also encourage an end to the Saudi spat with Qatar and urge the Saudis to find a path out of the Yemen war. Above all, the United States should normalize the U.S.-Saudi relationship rather than prioritize it, which requires a hard look at U.S. interests vis-à-vis Riyadh and serious

consideration of how best to encourage positive behavior while punishing problematic behavior. All of these steps will both decrease dangerously high pressures while further enabling the United States to focus on the fundamental challenges.

**Third, the United States must find a way to meaningfully deprioritize the Middle East.** Although the real geopolitical challenge going forward is posed by China, the United States remains trapped in Middle East purgatory. On the tombstone of the post-9/11 wars will be written some elaborate combination of perplexity over why they have lasted so long; haziness over their focus; and, ambiguity and anxiety over the balance sheet of what they achieved, prevented, and exacerbated. And yet the United States' over-militarized approach to the region continues. At least 20,000 new U.S. military forces have been sent in recent months, bringing the total estimate of U.S. military personnel in the Middle East to 80,000. This increase notably comes at a time when the U.S. diplomatic presence is plummeting in places like Iraq.

The administration's maximum pressure campaign is resulting in maximum focus on Iran. There are, of course, attendant opportunity costs for doing so. The geopolitical challenge posed by China—the primary threat to global order—is receiving too little time, attention, and resources.

While the United States should depart Middle East purgatory, it should not do so in a way that benefits the Russians. The United States can deprioritize the region without exacerbating Russian influence by deepening its diplomatic posture, convening like-minded and productive coalitions, and making it harder for Russia rely on the benefits of a regional security order managed by the United States.

#### Implications for U.S. Policy: Issues for Congress

The dynamics of the U.S.-Iran relationship are inextricably linked to regional stability and security. As the Subcommittee's Members consider U.S. policy, I urge you to look at the following areas of concern:

- 1) Strategy and Execution: Given that U.S. strategy toward Iran—and the Middle East—is convoluted, the administration should clarify what it is trying to achieve, why it is trying to do so, and above all, how it will do so.

Questions to consider: What is the administration seeking to achieve in its policy vis-à-vis Iran and the broader Middle East? How does it plan to implement this strategy—particularly given the profound opportunity costs in light of the high price of geopolitical competition with China and Russia? And, how is its messaging effectively supporting strategy execution?

- 2) Counter-ISIS Campaign and Coalition: The conflagration between the United States and Iran has imperiled the fight against ISIS and fueled discontent among some Iraqis.

Questions to consider: How and in what ways has the counter-ISIS campaign and coalition been degraded by the latest escalation between the U.S. and Iran? What role can Congress play to deepen U.S. engagement and consultation with key coalition members—above all, the Iraqi Government?

- 3) A Deal in Disarray: Detonating U.S. participation in the nuclear agreement rather than considering ways to improve it has resulted in the United States dividing itself from its fellow signatories while Iran pursues its own agenda.

Questions to consider: What pathways may succeed for building a level of agreement between Iran and key international actors to minimize its nuclear program?

- 4) U.S. Regional Presence and Purpose: For two decades, the United States has overwhelmingly relied on a military approach to the Middle East—and a flawed one at that. The administration is doubling down on that approach as the military's posture has skyrocketed despite little evidence that the swelling numbers of U.S. troops are effectively deterring threats. If the U.S. military is forced to suddenly depart from Iraq, the U.S. government's ability to influence and act will be severely handcuffed, to say nothing of the welcome that its departure would receive from ISIS and by the Iranians. And in critical places like Syria, the military's mission is worryingly opaque and colored by announcements of—and occasionally execution of—precipitous redeployments without serious consultation of this body or of key coalition members. Above all, this emphasis on a military approach has come at the expense of a diplomatic approach as the U.S. diplomatic presence regionally—particularly in Iraq—has been severely degraded.

Questions to consider: Under what conditions does the administration plan to redeploy the 20,000 new U.S. military personnel deployed to the Middle East? How does the administration plan to generate those conditions for withdrawal? How can the United States right size its regional military posture and appropriately tailor it to countering likely threats? How can it effectively streamline its Middle East military posture in light of the global context? How can it grow and rely on a more robust diplomatic presence in the region?

This Subcommittee is rightly concerned about how the lack of Middle East security and stability is threatening to monopolize U.S. national security resources. As I outlined today, there are no simple solutions; however, some steps are overdue in leading U.S. strategy toward the Middle East in a more coherent and sustainable direction.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you very much.  
Dr. TABATABAI.

**STATEMENT OF DR. ARIANE TABATABAI, ASSOCIATE POLITICAL SCIENTIST, RAND CORPORATION AND ADJUNCT SENIOR RESEARCH SCHOLAR, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS**

Dr. TABATABAI. Thank you, sir.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Wilson, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My testimony will proceed in three parts. First, I will begin by looking at the internal dynamics in Iran today, before examining what we might expect from the regime next, and I will end by discussing U.S. policy options.

Repression has been a consistent feature of the Islamic Republic since its inception in 1979 but 2019 marked new trends. It revealed the regime's heightened perception of threats both at home and abroad, a new boldness in operations, and a new capability, the ability to completely shut down the internet. So far, Tehran's actions in 2020 indicate the regime's willingness to continue to attempt to sideline not only those outside of the regime space but also groups and individuals typically associated with the pragmatic segments of the system.

The regime is currently primarily engaged in two type of efforts to limit the scent. One, it is preventing and stopping popular opposition by hindering the flow of information and through the use of lethal force. And two, it is limiting the scent within the ranks of the regime, which includes restricting certain factions' involvement in the political process, such as the ongoing efforts to disqualify candidates belonging to certain camps by taking—from taking part in the elections.

Nevertheless, unrest continues in Iran as the maximum pressure campaign, coupled with the regime's own in competence and corruption, continues to take their toll on Iran's economy. Despite continued popular unrest, the regime appears unlikely to fundamentally change its domestic or foreign policy behavior. And although Iran appears to have made a symbolic response to Soleimani's death, the regime probably does not feel that it has achieved full justice for Soleimani's killing.

The United States should be prepared for further action from Iran, likely a more subtle response that is intended to limit our ability to react.

Though limited, Iran's toolbox allows the regime to overcome its conventional inferiority, vis-a-vis the United States, enabling it to pose a challenge to us and our partners. It includes the following: disinformation to sway public opinion; attempts to interfere in our elections; cyber attacks and efforts to target U.S. persons, organizations, agencies, and infrastructure; a network of proxies, including tens of thousands of fighters across several theaters and countries; direct IRGC attacks on U.S. personnel, assets, and interests; resumption of attacks on oil infrastructure; and the resumption of nuclear activities that were previously halted under the JCPOA.

Clearly, the United States should be prepared for all scenarios, including a potential collapse of the regime. However, for the fore-

seeable future, the United States should be crafting policies that advance U.S. interest, even if the Islamic Republic remains in place because that is currently the most likely scenario.

In the event of further escalation from Iran, the United States may very well have to consider a kinetic response but it should do so when its own strategic gains are clear. Deploying more forces whose mission and operational status is unclear to the region might not actually deter Iran and a deployment arguably offers more targets for asymmetric Iranian retaliation. Merely moving troops is not sufficient to deter an adversary when redlines and objectives are not clearly and credibly communicated.

The United States can identify and discretely target Iranian proxy capabilities, as it has in the past. This could be effective if deployed surgically and accompanied by clear messaging to Tehran.

Given recent developments, appetite for negotiations in Iran is likely limited. Nevertheless, the United States can prepare the groundwork for engagement by sending clear signals to Tehran that it is serious about seeking a diplomatic solution and avoiding conflict, as the President has done on a number of occasions.

Currently U.S. policy toward Iran is heavily reliant on sanctions. Sanctions are a critical means of achieving U.S. objectives but they are only fully effective if they are coupled with other U.S. instruments of power. The administration should consider offering a cohesive message to Iran that clearly lays out U.S. objectives, what the United States is willing to offer to Iran, and what Iran would have to do in return. This would need to be done within the framework of a realistic plan that does not rely on maximalist positions. Absent this, Tehran may interpret the administration's ultimate goal as its complete surrender and such capitulation is a non-starter for Iran and has, historically, led nations to go to war.

Congress could request more clarity in this messaging and decisionmaking process, as well as encourage coordination with allies. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Tabatabai follows: ]

## Escalation with Iran: Outcomes and Implications for U.S. Interests and Regional Stability

Ariane M. Tabatabai

CT-522

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*Escalation with Iran: Outcomes and Implications for U.S. Interests and Regional Stability*

Testimony of Ariane M. Tabatabai<sup>1</sup>  
The RAND Corporation<sup>2</sup>

Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism  
United States House of Representatives

January 28, 2020

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share my analysis and testify before the subcommittee today on “Escalation with Iran: Outcomes and Implications for U.S. Interests and Regional Stability.” This testimony includes an explanation of the internal dynamics within Iran, courses of action we anticipate from the regime, and options for the United States moving forward.

### Internal Dynamics

The Iranian political and security landscapes are notoriously opaque and complex. Myriad power centers and cross-cutting factions exist, representing the parts of the political spectrum deemed acceptable by the regime and sidelining the rest of society. Although censorship, repression, and voter suppression have been consistent features of the Islamic Republic since its inception in 1979, 2019—the regime’s 40th year in power—marked new trends. It revealed the regime’s heightened perception of threats both at home and abroad, a new boldness in operations, and a new capability (the ability to completely shut down the internet).<sup>3</sup> So far, Tehran’s actions in 2020 indicate the regime’s willingness to continue to attempt to sideline not only those outside of the regime’s base but also groups and individuals typically associated with the pragmatist segments of the system. The regime is currently primarily engaged in two types of efforts to limit dissent: (1) preventing and stopping popular opposition and (2) limiting dissent

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author’s alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.

<sup>2</sup> The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

<sup>3</sup> Ariane M. Tabatabai, *Iran’s National Security Debate—Implications for Future U.S.-Iran Negotiations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-344-RC, 2019, p. 5.

within the ranks of the regime, which includes restricting certain factions' involvement in the political process.

#### *Preventing and Stopping Popular Opposition*

In November 2019, protests broke out throughout Iran after the government implemented a change in its long-standing fuel subsidy policy, leading to a sharp increase in gasoline prices.<sup>4</sup> The regime took two main actions to crack down on dissent.

First, as it typically does, the regime deployed security forces to intimidate, arrest, and even kill protesters. However, the speed and magnitude of these efforts was stronger than in recent history. Over three days, security forces killed a still-disputed number of people (ranging from several hundred individuals, according to Amnesty International, to possibly more than 1,000, according to the U.S. Department of State). Over the next month, they arrested thousands.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, during the 2009 Green Movement—the previous time that the regime viewed internal unrest as particularly challenging to its legitimacy—the official number of fatalities was 30 a full six weeks after the June 12 election that sparked protest (the actual number was possibly closer to 80).<sup>6</sup> More were killed in the following months as civil unrest continued,<sup>7</sup> and by June 2010, “dozens of demonstrators” had been killed and “thousands arrested,” but that total came a year after the beginning of the Green Movement, as opposed to the month after the November 2019 protests, where several hundred were killed in just three days.<sup>8</sup>

Second, the regime shut down Iranians' access to the internet, disrupting the flow of information into and out of the country.<sup>9</sup> By doing so, the regime was able to crack down effectively on protesters while delaying international reactions. International rights groups and governments were unable to react in real time to the events in Iran, and Iranians did not have access to information beyond state media. Although the Islamic Republic had been limiting access to the internet (particularly media and social media platforms) and exploring a national intranet for a number of years, this marked the first instance in which the regime was effectively able to cut off inbound and outbound internet traffic, reportedly leaving the country to operate at 5 to 7 percent of its usual connectivity levels.<sup>10</sup>

In January 2020, Iranians once again took to the streets throughout the country after the targeting of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force commander Qassem

<sup>4</sup> Farnaz Fassihi and Rick Gladstone, “Iran Abruptly Raises Fuel Prices, and Protests Erupt,” *New York Times*, November 15, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Amnesty International, “Iran: Thousands Arbitrarily Detained and At Risk of Torture in Chilling Post-Protest Crackdown,” December 16, 2019; Humeyra Pamuk, “U.S. Says Iran May Have Killed More Than 1,000 In Recent Protests,” Reuters, December 5, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Simon Jeffrey, “Iran Election Protests: The Dead, Jailed and Missing,” *The Guardian*, July 29, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Robert F. Worth and Nazila Fathi, “Police Are Said to Have Killed 10 in Iran Protests,” *New York Times*, December 27, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> “Timeline: Iran’s Post Election Protests,” *Financial Times*, June 11, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Erin Cunningham, “More Than 100 Protesters Are Feared Killed in Iran Crackdown, Amnesty International Says,” *Washington Post*, November 19, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Lily Hay Newman, “How the Iranian Government Shut Off the Internet,” *Wired*, November 17, 2019.

Soleimani. The crowds that gathered to mourn Soleimani were large, possibly in the millions. While state engineering (both in terms of incentives offered, such as time off from work, and threats) likely encouraged some attendees, many Iranians took to the streets in a show of nationalism—partially because of Soleimani’s popularity, but perhaps because of concerns about a potential escalation with an outside power.<sup>11</sup>

However, this period of solidarity with the regime was brief. Support faded and protests resumed after the downing of a Ukrainian airliner, leading to the death of all 176 crew and passengers onboard.<sup>12</sup> This time, protesters voiced their discontent with the regime’s blatant disinformation campaign surrounding the crash. The regime initially claimed that the crash was caused by a technical issue. A few days later, the IRGC Aerospace commander admitted that an Iranian system had accidentally shot down the plane, mistaking it for an U.S. cruise missile.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the regime had realized that it could not hide the details of the incident or was trying to move ahead of and shape the narrative around the incident. Regardless, the Soleimani and airliner protests indicate that discontent with the regime, nationalism, and concerns about another potentially costly war all co-exist.

Security forces used violence against the January 2020 protests and the regime attempted to disrupt the flow of information once again, but they do not appear to have perceived these protests as significant enough to use the same tools as in November, or they may have seen the political and economic costs of doing so as outweighing their benefits.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the regime has clearly built its capabilities and demonstrated its will to resort to more extreme tools should it face more existential challenges in the months ahead, and is more likely to achieve its goals of ensuring regime survival than not.

#### *Limiting Intra-regime Opposition*

The regime has also demonstrated its resolve to limit intra-regime opposition. As of mid-January 2020, the Guardian Council, the entity responsible for restricting elections, had disqualified 90 of the 247 sitting members of parliament from participating in February’s parliamentary elections.<sup>15</sup> According to the official narrative, members are disqualified for “nonpolitical” reasons, although it is clear that at least some of the sitting members have been

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<sup>11</sup> Erin Cunningham et al., “Soleimani’s Funeral Procession in Iran Sees Massive Crowds and Calls for Revenge,” *Washington Post*, January 6, 2020; Najmeh Bozorgmehr, “Huge Crowds Turn Out to Mourn Iran’s Soleimani,” *Financial Times*, January 5, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> “Plane Shot Down Because of Human Error, Iran Says,” *New York Times*, January 11, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> The IRGC had anticipated and planned for a U.S. response to its targeting of Iraqi bases housing U.S. servicemembers; “Sardar Hajizadeh: Nirooha-ye Mossalah va Sepah Nemikhashtan In Majara Ra Penhan Konand,” IRNA, January 11, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> “Iran: Scores Injured As Security Forces Use Unlawful Force to Crush Protests,” *Amnesty International*, January 15, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> “Kadkhodayi: Sallahiat-e 90 Namayandeh-ye Majles be Dalil-e Masael-e Mali Rad Shod,” *Tasnim News*, January 13, 2020.

disqualified because of their political leanings.<sup>16</sup> Parliamentary elections tend to see a lower turnout than presidential ones, and a lower turnout tends to favor hardliners and conservatives, as the regime's core base is more likely to vote than the rest of the population. By disqualifying candidates, the regime is both eliminating potential challengers to chosen candidates and signaling to the populace that its votes do not matter. A more hardline parliament would stymie any efforts made in the remainder of President Hassan Rouhani's second and final term, which will come to an end with Iran's next presidential elections in mid-2021. Having lost most of his political capital following President Donald Trump's May 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Rouhani will face significant obstacles in leaving a legacy that favors pragmatist candidates in 2021.

For his part, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appears to have been much more involved in day-to-day security and defense decisionmaking than usual. Although Khamenei typically sends representatives to the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), he took the rare step of personally attending and chairing the emergency session of the SNSC following Soleimani's death.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Khamenei led the Tehran Friday prayer on January 17—the first time he has done so since the Arab Spring.<sup>18</sup> Khamenei only leads the Friday prayer when the nation or regime faces an emergency, and he uses this platform to telegraph redlines and expectations to the regime and populace—as he did during the Green Movement, providing the green light to his security forces to target and kill protesters.

Khamenei's direct supervision of and involvement in different events since Soleimani's death indicate that the regime perceives threats at home and abroad. The regime is feeling the impact of the U.S. maximum pressure campaign while weathering dissent from its population and within its own ranks. However, the maximum pressure has not led to a change in regime behavior, but rather has produced the contrary result: Tehran has doubled down on its most problematic behavior.

### Iran's Likely Courses of Action

Despite continued popular unrest, the regime appears unlikely to fundamentally change its domestic or foreign policy behavior. The Islamic Republic also appears unwilling to meaningfully negotiate with the United States for the remainder of Trump's first term, choosing to wait for the results of the 2020 election before returning to the negotiating table. And although Iran appears to have made a symbolic response to Soleimani's death—using military force in a way aimed at avoiding U.S. casualties—the regime probably does not feel that it has achieved

<sup>16</sup> "Tahan Nazif: 90 Darsad-e Namayandegan-e Radd-e Salahiat Shode be Dalael-e Gheyr-e Siasi Taaed Nashodeand," *Tasnim News*, January 20, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> "Taaed-e Jalasch-ye Rahbar-e Enqelab ba Aza-ye Shura-ye Aali-e Amniat Baad Az Shahadat-e Sardar Soleimani," *Donya-ye Eqtessad*, January 3, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> "Imam Khamenei Namaz-e Jomch-ye In Hafch-ye Tehran Ra Eqameh Mikonand," *Tasnim News*, January 12, 2020.

full justice for Soleimani's killing. The United States should be prepared for a further response from Iran, likely a more subtle response that is intended to limit our ability to respond.<sup>19</sup>

The Iranian toolkit is much more limited than that of the United States, but while Iran is not currently able to fundamentally challenge the United States, it can continue to be a nuisance and threaten U.S. regional partners. Iran's toolbox is designed to allow the regime to overcome its conventional inferiority vis-à-vis the United States. It includes the following:

- disinformation through social media campaigns to sway public opinion; attempts to interfere in elections
- cyber attacks and efforts to target U.S. persons, organizations, agencies, and infrastructure
- a network of proxies, including tens of thousands of fighters across several theaters and countries, which can attack U.S. troops, facilities, assets, interests, and partners, as well as perform kidnappings
- direct IRGC attacks on U.S. troops, facilities, assets, interests, and partners
- resumption of attacks on regional partners and oil production infrastructure and transport
- resumption of nuclear activities that were halted under the JCPOA.

### Options for the United States

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's 12 points cover a breadth of policy issues relevant to the United States, and—regardless of the ongoing debates about how to prioritize or compartmentalize these issues—his general aims cross partisan lines.<sup>20</sup> Current and future administrations are likely to grapple with the issues covered by the 12 points, including Iran's nuclear and missile programs, regional interventions, and support for terrorist and insurgent groups. Importantly, our European allies and regional partners also view these categories of Iranian actions as challenging. The United States has a number of tools available to address the challenges posed by Iran. An effective solution to these challenges would include a multilateral, multilayered approach and grounded in Iran and the Middle East's current political reality, rather than on what the Iranian political system might look like in the future. Congress could play an effective role in shaping such an approach by pressing the administration to lay out its process and objectives clearly and to explain in what ways its current strategy helps the United States achieve these objectives.

Although the Islamic Republic's legitimacy has clearly suffered and popular discontent continues to grow, U.S. policy toward Iran must be based on reality. Clearly, the United States should seek to be prepared for all scenarios, including a potential collapse of the regime—which

<sup>19</sup> Elisa Catalano Ewers and Ariane Tabatabai, "How Will Iran Respond to Soleimani's Killing—And Where Will the Escalation End?" *Washington Post*, January 7, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> The 12 points include a full account of the Iranian nuclear program's possible military dimensions and a verifiable halt to any such activity in the future; end of enrichment and a commitment never to pursue plutonium reprocessing (including closing the Arak Heavy Water Reactor); all site access to the International Atomic Energy Agency; ending the proliferation of ballistic missiles; release of all U.S. citizens and nationals of allied countries detained in Iran; an end to support for terrorist groups in the region; and withdrawal from various Middle Eastern conflicts (Mike Pompeo, "After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy," *Heritage Foundation*, May 21, 2018).

could bring about a friendly democratic government (which remains a low probability scenario for the foreseeable future) or lead to another authoritarian regime, such as one led by the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MeK), an unlikely contender for power with a troubling history.<sup>21</sup> The United States might even witness regime collapse in Iran and a lengthy, bloody civil war that would further destabilize the Middle East and have repercussions in South and Central Asia. However, for the foreseeable future, the United States should craft policies that advance U.S. interests even if the Islamic Republic remains in place—because this is the most likely outcome. The administration has noted that the United States is achieving its objectives with the maximum pressure campaign, but it has mostly focused on tactical, rather than strategic, goals.<sup>22</sup> Congress could request more information about how the administration defines the success of its policy. Similarly, the administration could explain what, if anything, it is doing to mitigate the obvious costs associated with the maximum pressure campaign.<sup>23</sup> These costs include the humanitarian impact of sanctions on Iranians, such as the shortage of medical goods and products. From a U.S. policy perspective, these costs also include potential setbacks, including the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear agreement leading to the Iranian decision to resume certain nuclear activities limited by the deal.<sup>24</sup>

In the event of further escalation from Iran, the United States should consider proportional options that meet its strategic objectives. In addition to the surprising and arguably disproportionate act of killing Soleimani, the administration has responded to a range of Iranian actions by committing more troops to the region and imposing sanctions on Iran. However, deploying more forces—whose mission and operational status is unclear—to the region might not actually deter Iran, and the deployment arguably offers more targets for asymmetric Iranian retaliation. Merely moving troops is not sufficient to deter an adversary when redlines and objectives are not clearly and credibly communicated. The United States has identified and discreetly targeted Iranian and proxy capabilities—such as radar installations—connected with Iran’s missile project, and it has conducted covert or military actions against Iranian proxies that attack U.S. assets. Such responses could be effective if they are deployed surgically and are accompanied by clear messaging to Tehran. Ultimately, the U.S. has the conventional capabilities to address any direct action Iran might take at sea or on land in the vicinity of U.S. assets. In the event of escalation by Iran, the United States very well might have to consider and pursue a kinetic response, but it should do so when its own strategic gains are clear and with a gradual approach, avoiding going from zero to 100.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Rubin, “The Cult of Rajavi,” *New York Times*, July 13, 2003; Human Rights Watch, *No Exit—Human Rights Abuses Inside the Mojahedin Khalq Camps*, New York, May 18, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Liz Sly and Suzan Haidamou, “Trump’s Sanctions On Iran Are Hitting Hezbollah, and It Hurts,” *The Washington Post*, May 18, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Reports suggest that far from slowing and dialing down its support for proxies, Iran is building and expanding its network of nonstate allies and partners. See Seth G. Jones, “War By Proxy—Iran’s Growing Footprint in the Middle East,” Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 11, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Maximum Pressure”—US Economic Sanctions Harm Iranians’ Right to Health, New York, October 29, 2019; “Iran May Leave NPT If Nuclear Case Sent to UNSC, Zarif Warns,” *Tasnim News*, January 20, 2020; “Iran’s 5th Step Keeps Balance in JCPOA, Diplomat Says,” *Tasnim News*, January 7, 2020.

Given recent developments, appetite for negotiations in Iran is likely limited. Nevertheless, the United States can prepare the groundwork for engagement by sending clear signals to Tehran that it is serious about seeking a diplomatic solution and avoiding conflict (as the President has on a number of occasions). Currently, U.S. policy toward Iran is heavily reliant on sanctions. Sanctions are a critical means to achieving America's objectives, but they are only fully effective if they are coupled with other U.S. instruments of power, and their overuse can destroy their efficacy.<sup>25</sup> If Iran believes that sanctions are a constant in U.S. policy and it will be sanctioned regardless of its behavior, the regime will have little incentive to seek engagement and to change its policies. Second, the administration should consider offering a cohesive message to Iran that clearly lays out U.S. objectives, what the United States is willing to offer to Iran, and what Iran would have to offer in return. This would need to be done within the framework of a realistic plan that does not rely on maximalist positions. Absent this, Tehran may interpret the administration's ultimate goal as its complete surrender, and such capitulation is a nonstarter for Iran and has historically led nations to go to war. Congress could request more clarity in this messaging and decisionmaking process as well as encourage coordination with allies.

Third, to curate an attainable and sustainable agreement (or series of agreements), the United States should consider identifying zones of possible agreement and the regime's absolute redlines. This can be achieved by identifying areas of consensus within the regime (such as the need for a missile program to meet defense needs) and leveraging existing fissures within the Iranian system.<sup>26</sup> Such fissures stem from disagreements within the system regarding the appropriate course of action on certain matters, including the future of Iran's nuclear and missile programs (issues include the range of these missiles, testing, and the proliferation of capabilities to terrorist groups and militias).

An acceptable outcome to both parties is likely to involve a single comprehensive deal addressing all sets of challenges posed by Iran or a series of agreements on these different items.<sup>27</sup> The former would have the benefit of addressing the threat posed by Iran and allowing the United States to focus more on great power competition as directed by the National Defense Strategy and the National Security Strategy. However, the diversity of the issues the United States wishes to tackle, coupled with the intricacy of the technical aspects of the nuclear and missile files, would make such an agreement challenging to attain and sustain. In particular, there are questions about what a process leading to such an agreement would look like; where different relevant partners and allies would fit in the process; and how different aspects of such an agreement would be implemented and verified. Alternatively, the United States could try to attain a series of comprehensive agreements by siloing each major issue, allowing for more tailored processes and mechanisms to address vastly different challenges. The United States could work with its partners to lead these negotiations in a step-by-step manner or in parallel to

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<sup>25</sup> Jacob J. Lew and Richard Nephew, "The Use and Misuse of Economic Statecraft," *Foreign Affairs*, November–December 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Tabatabai, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Tabatabai, 2019, pp. 23–24.

each other. Ultimately, no single agreement (or even series of agreements) are likely to satisfy every U.S. concern with the Islamic Republic.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you.

Ms. PLETKA.

**STATEMENT OF DANIELLE PLETKA SENIOR FELLOW IN FOREIGN AND DEFENSE POLICY STUDIES, AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE AND ANDREW H. SIEGEL PROFESSOR ON AMERICAN MIDDLE EASTERN FOREIGN POLICY, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY WALSH SCHOOL OF FOREIGN SERVICE**

Ms. PLETKA. Mr. Chairman and Mr. Wilson, good morning. Thank you so much for having me back. It is always an honor to testify before this committee.

The title of this hearing, I believe, misplaces a bit what should be the appropriate focus on the Islamic Republic of Iran. Without overstating the case, I believe this is not actually a moment of escalation with Iran, at least not in terms of direct conflict. We are likely to see, as my colleagues have pointed out, some proxy escalation but even that, I think, will be careful for fear of provoking the unpredictable President Trump.

More important, I believe, is that notwithstanding victories, in Syria, Iran really is in a period of flux and stress, unlike many we have seen in recent years. Internally, next door, and in—next door in Iraq and in Lebanon, home to Iran's most important proxy, Hezbollah, the regime is under enormous pressure.

In connection with Qasem Soleimani's death and the likely transition ahead of the death of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, those pressures create an opportunity for the United States. The key questions are what are we going to do with that opportunity, what the actual policy of the United States is toward the Islamic Republic, and how the maximum pressure campaign will impact those aims.

On the direct question of the impact of the Soleimani strike, let's start with Iran itself and the Quds Force that the late general led for the last two decades. Those who have suggested that the IRGC and the Quds Force will revert to business as usual after the passing of their leaders I think are confused about the role that Soleimani played. He was not simply the leader of Iran's expeditionary forces and coordinator of its proxies, he was a man of great strategic intelligence and cunning, with charisma that made his leadership all the more effective. His successor, Esmail Qaani, is, to paraphrase an American politician, no Qasem Soleimani. What does that mean? That will be guesswork for us.

But Qaani's power to control Iran's major proxies may portend increased independent action on their part. We have already seen threats against U.S. officials and a call for personal jihad, which is highly unusual in the Shia faith by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.

The Hashd al-Shaabi, the popular mobilization units in Iraq, have also escalated attacks on the U.S. on U.S. targets in Iraq. This is all happening at a moment of uncertainty in Iran itself, which recently suffered the worst demonstrations it has experienced since the revolution.

Protests in Iran reemerged on a large scale last November and hundreds, if not thousands, have died at the hands of security forces, and it took weeks to crush the protests. With elections

ahead and Ayatollah Khamenei's succession due sooner, rather than later, no wonder those deeply invested in the system of the Islamic Republic are worried.

Things have been similarly unstable in neighboring Iraq, where popular demonstrations forced the resignation of Iraqi Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi. Those demonstrations have been ongoing also since the beginning of October.

It is important to understand just how much of a slap in the face these demonstrations in Iraq are to Iran. They have been dominated by Iraqi Shiites. They have focused on governance failures, corruption, and on Iranian influence. And neither efforts by regular police nor the Hashd were capable of stifling that popular anger. The Iranian Consulate in Najaf was attacked and burned down.

Ironically, demonstrations that began around the same time in Lebanon have focused exactly—on exactly the same thing—governance failures, corruption, and sectarianism. Those also resulted in the collapse of the government with Prime Minister Saad Hariri stepping down. A new Hezbollah-only government has since been appointed with Hezbollah's chosen candidate, Hassan Diab, at its helm.

Circling back to Tehran and looking at its major satellites in Iraq and Lebanon, it is fair to say Ayatollah Khamenei has had a bad month. Remember, he celebrated the beginning of 2020 thinking he had quelled protests at home, that the United States was weak, disengaged. 2019 saw the disastrous Trump decision to quit Northeast Syria and betray our Kurdish allies, as well as the administration's low-key responses to the downing of an American drone, attacks on Gulf shipping, and the direct attack on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq and Khurais facilities.

While the U.S. did in fact retaliate in all instances with substantial cyber attacks on Iran, according to my understanding, the failure to respond overtly only served to reinforce the signal that the Syria withdrawal had sent: that the U.S. is turning its back on the Middle East.

But then the Soleimani strike and the U.S. dismissal of efforts to toss U.S. Forces out of Iraq put paid to that notion that the U.S. was ceding the region. The question this hearing raises is: What is next? What is the message the United States is trying to send? That is a question not only on our minds here, but on the minds of policymakers and leaders in Jerusalem, and in Riyadh, and elsewhere in the Middle East who wonder what the U.S. strategic posture really is. Are we committed to staying in Iraq? Are we committed to Saudi Arabia's defense to staying in Syria, to competing with the Russians, to keeping the plus up of troops in the Gulf or not? Is the maximum pressure campaign about a new JCPOA or is it really about regime collapse?

The right course is to ramp up pressure on Iran politically, militarily, and diplomatically—I have just another moment, if you won't mind—and for the Congress, if I may, to embrace some consistency on the question of Iran policy. It is incoherent to denounce the Soleimani killing and the abandonment of the Kurds in much the same breath. Either we want a robust posture in the region or we do not want a robust posture in the region.

The right course is to begin to work more seriously with Iranian dissidents and opponents of the regime with a view to a better future to further isolate Iran supporters within Lebanon and Iraq, and empower protesters against Iranian domination. We know the regime is under pressure. We know they will seek to regain their footing. We know their economic resources are stretched. We know the Iraqi people and the Lebanese people do not actually wish to be ruled from Tehran.

What we do not know is what U.S. policy actually will be going forward. That is a much needed clarity.

Thank you for your time.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Pletka follows: ]



Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism  
On "Escalation with Iran: Outcomes and implications for US interests and regional stability"

## **Escalation with Iran: Outcomes and implications for US interests and regional stability**

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Wilson, good morning. It's always an honor to testify before this Committee, and the topic before us is an important one.

The title of this hearing, I believe, misplaces what should be the appropriate focus on the Islamic Republic of Iran. Without overstating the case, I believe this is not a moment of "Escalation with Iran;" more likely, we are in for a short period of de-escalation in terms of direct conflict, and some escalation in the use of Iran's proxies against US and allied targets. But that in some ways is a return to status quo ante in Tehran's long shadow war against the Great Satan. And over-emphasizing that proxy war shifts focus from what is different about this moment.

Iran is in a period of flux and stress unlike many we have seen in recent years. Internally, next door in Iraq and in Lebanon, home to Iran's most important proxy Hezbollah, the regime is under enormous pressure. In conjunction with Qassem Soleimani's death and the likely transition ahead after the death of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, those pressures create an opportunity for the United States. The key questions are what we do with that opportunity, what the actual policy of the United States is towards the Islamic Republic, and how the "maximum pressure" campaign will impact our aims.

On the direct question of the impact of the Soleimani strike, let's start with Iran itself and the Quds Force that the late General Soleimani led for at least the last 22 years. Those who have suggested that the IRGC and Quds Force will revert to business as usual after the passing of their leader are confused about the role Soleimani played. He was not simply the leader of Iran's expeditionary forces and coordinator of its proxies, he was a man of strategic intelligence and cunning, with great charisma that made his leadership all the more effective. His successor, Esmail Qaani is, to paraphrase an American politician, no Qassem Soleimani. He certainly lacks the star power, and likely also lacks the close relationship of trust with the Supreme Leader that Soleimani enjoyed.

What does that mean? This will be guesswork for us, but Qaani's power to control Iran's major proxies may portend increased independent action on their part. We have already seen a threat against US officials and a call for personal jihad by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. The *Hashd e Shabi* (or Popular Mobilization Units) in Iraq have also escalated attacks on US targets in Iraq. How the United States will respond is an unknown at this time.

This is all also happening at a moment of uncertainty in Iran itself, which recently suffered the worst demonstrations it has experienced since the Revolution.

Protests in Iran reemerged on a large scale in November with an unexpected gasoline price rise, and metastasized from there. Hundreds if not thousands have died at the hands of security forces, and it took weeks to crush the protests. Note that similar protests in 2009 reportedly left less than 100 dead. Two weeks in November and December left **a ten-fold toll**, which at the very least indicates some sense of fear inside the regime establishment about its hold on the public. And with elections ahead and Ayatollah Khamenei's succession due sooner rather than later, no wonder those deeply invested in the system of the Islamic Republic are worried.

Things have been similarly unstable in neighboring Iraq, where popular demonstrations that forced the resignation of Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi have been ongoing since the beginning of October. It is important to understand just how much of a slap in Iran's face these demonstrations are. Dominated by Iraqi Shi'ites, and focused on governance failures, corruption and Iranian influence, neither efforts by regular Iraqi police nor the *Hashd* were capable of stifling popular anger. The Iranian consulate in Najaf was attacked and signs denouncing Iran figured among the demonstrators. The fact that Iran instructed its proxies to suppress protests, and the

death of more than 500 people have only inflamed the problem.

Notwithstanding efforts by Iran and its proxies to harness popular anger about the Soleimani killing, last week demonstrators returned to the streets demanding a technocratic government and an end to the sectarian spoils system.

Ironically, demonstrations that began around the same time in Lebanon have focused on exactly the same sectarian/governance problems as **Iraqis**. Those also resulted in the collapse of the government, with Prime Minister Saad Hariri stepping down. A new Hezbollah-only government has since been appointed, with the terrorist group's chosen candidate Hassan Diab at its helm. The transition from former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, a nominally independent and anti-Iran leader, rips the mask of Lebanese leadership once and for all. Now there cannot be even a pretence that Lebanon remains an independent state. It is an Iranian vassal.

During those demonstrations, Iran followed the same playbook in Lebanon as in Iraq, ordering its proxies into the streets to crush demonstrations, with similar results. And protestors have now returned to demand an end to the sectarian system that has characterized the Lebanese government for eight decades.

Circling back to Tehran and looking at its major satellites in Iraq and Lebanon, it's fair to say Ayatollah Khamenei has had a bad month. Remember, he celebrated the New Year thinking he had quelled protests at home, and that the United States was weak and disengaged. 2019 saw the disastrous Trump decision to quit northeastern Syria and betray our Kurdish allies, as well as the administration's low-key responses to the downing of an American drone, attacks on Gulf shipping and the direct attack on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq and Khurais facilities.

While the US did in fact retaliate in all instances with substantial cyber strikes on Iran according to my understanding, the failure to respond overtly only served to reinforce the signal that the Syria withdrawal had sent: The United States is turning its back on the Middle East and its allies and partners there. But the Soleimani strike and the US dismissal of efforts to toss US forces out of Iraq put paid to the notion that we were ceding the region to Iran. The question that this hearing rightly raises, however, is: What next?

That is a question not only on the minds of Washington observers and policymakers. From Jerusalem to Riyadh there is uncertainty about what the US strategic posture actually is. Are we committed to staying in Iraq? To Saudi Arabia's defense? To staying in Syria? To competing with the Russians? To keeping the plus up of troops in the Gulf, or not? Is the "maximum pressure" campaign about a new JCPOA or about regime collapse?

The right course is to amp up pressure on Iran politically, militarily and diplomatically. And for the Congress, if I may, to embrace consistency on the question of Iran policy; it is incoherent to denounce the Soleimani killing and the abandonment of the Kurds in much the same breath. Either we want a robust posture in the region that deters our enemies and helps our friends, or we don't.

The right course is to begin working more seriously with Iranian dissidents and opponents of the regime with a view to a better future. To further isolate Iran's supporters within Lebanon and Iraq and empower protesters against Iranian domination. We know the regime is under pressure. We know they will seek to regain their footing, but that economic resources are stretched. We know the Iraqi people and the Lebanese people do not actually wish to be ruled from Tehran. What we do not know is what US policy actually will be going forward.

This uncertainty will be a boon to Iran as it regains its footing after the Soleimani strike and the horrifying downing of Ukraine International Airlines flight 752. Iran's message to its neighbors

has been that the United States is an unreliable partner, and that Donald Trump cannot be counted on to come to any nation's defense. Only a direct strike on Americans, they emphasize, will cause him to respond with force. Meanwhile, Iran's friends in Washington have sought to cement an alliance of left-wing non-interventionists and libertarian Republicans to pressure the administration to back further away from the region.

A reading of the political tea leaves and a sense of Iran's position and advantages suggests that Tehran will seek to exploit its proxies in Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere to cause trouble for America and its allies and partners. That it will do its best to orchestrate an aggressive push to oust US troops from the region, as Hezbollah leader Nasrallah has suggested. That it will continue to test limits gingerly, seeking to once again understand the President's red lines. And that it will press the patience of our European friends as it pushes outside the bounds of the JCPOA.

Finally, we should expect that General Qaani, the new Quds Force leader, will seek to make his mark. Remember, he had a hand in the AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires in 1994, and has been the coordinator of non-Arab Shi'ite forces fighting on the ground in Syria. Ultimately, however, he, like the Supreme Leader and many here in Washington, is waiting for November 2020 to decide on a definitive future course.

Thank you.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you for your testimony.

We will now move to member questions under the 5-minute rule. I will begin, followed by Ranking Member Wilson. We will then alternate between the parties.

Let me begin by asking Dr. Karlin, with respect to the Soleimani strike there is concern that the Trump Administration did not consider the fallout or implications for the U.S. interest in the region, Hezbollah, arguably Iran's strongest proxy, in addition to its ongoing military activities.

How and where could Iran deploy Hezbollah to threaten the U.S. or our partners? And what advanced capabilities has Iran provided Hezbollah that are most concerning to the U.S.?

Ms. KARLIN. Thank you for your question, Mr. Chairman. I think there is very real concern that is warranted that the administration did not think about the second-and third-order effects to this strike, a strike that had been pondered by previous U.S. administrations and also by the Israelis and then not taken. Had there been some serious consideration, I think we would have seen enhanced force protection, for example, and a plethora of embassy notifications, particularly across the Middle East, and perhaps flowing troops ahead of time.

So I think there is a lot of evidence that one should be concerned that these attendant effects were not considered.

How the Iranians might respond, there is not a shortage of options, to be frank. They have done the official military response and it ended up being relatively superficial and, luckily, the injuries were not catastrophic, although very real on the U.S. Military personnel side.

What we should expect now is going to be some sort of effort by their various clients, quite possibly by Hezbollah. There are soft targets across the Gulf. For example, if you look at Bahrain, places where U.S. sailors hang out, you could see them hitting U.S. troops in places like Jordan, also no shortage of soft targets there, or even potentially going directly against U.S. diplomats around the region.

So they have a lot of options and I guess what I would say is you know stay tuned. When we have looked at the Iranians, historically, they have not necessarily felt this need to respond automatic

Mr. TRONE. What do you see next for Syria on Hezbollah? ally. We have seen this when folks like Iman Mughniyah and Abbas Musawi were killed. So we now really need to be, I think, in an eyes wide open and as prepared as possible posture.

Ms. KARLIN. On Syria, I think the Iranians, and Hezbollah, and the Russians have gotten what they wanted. Bashar al-Assad is not going anywhere. Granted, he has this sporty insurgency to continue tackling and that will continue but a year from now, 2 years from now, when we are in future hearings, I suspect Bashar al-Assad will still be around. And as he increasingly takes control, Hezbollah will be able to now focus less on Syria and more on other things that the Iranians need them to do, in particular, what is happening domestically in Lebanon.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you.

Dr. Tabatabai, the downing of the Ukrainian airliner sparked the resurgence of demonstrations in Iran. How will these protests af-

fect near-term Iranian decisionmaking, specifically, potential retaliation for the killing of Soleimani? And how are the protests impacting the parliamentary elections scheduled in February in Iran?

Dr. TABATABAI. Thank you, sir.

Yes, as you mentioned, the downing of the airliner has led to protests in Iran. What is important to note, though, is that protests are an inherent feature of Iranian public life. They have been happening for 40 years.

So I would be careful to kind of chase what is happening in Iran domestically and put too much weight in terms of what impact it may have on the regime. That said, it is quite clear now, I think, that the next parliament in Iran is going to be fairly hardline, that most of the so-called reformists and moderates have been sidelined in an attempt to undermine President Rouhani and his efforts going into the Iranian Presidential election year.

Mr. TRONE. Ms. Pletka, Iran has long sought the withdrawal of U.S. Forces from Iraq. In what ways is Tehran likely to exert pressure on the Iraqi political system to push for the expulsion of our troops, how should we respond, and do you believe the reduced diplomatic presence in Iraq is hindering our ability to counter Iranian influence in Baghdad?

Ms. PLETKA. Thank you, sir. That is a great question.

I think that is going to be Iran's No. 1 priority is to use its proxies, whether they are in terrorist groups around the region or in governments that they support to try to push U.S. troops out of the region and to try to extend Iranian influence even further than it has extended in recent years. They are going to do that through—they are going to do that using the popular mobilization units. They are going to do that using the turmoil that we see on the ground right now in the formation of a new government. They are going to do that using Hezbollah. They are going to use that using strategic attacks against U.S. targets that they believe go up to but do not push past what they believe or assess to be the President's red line.

The challenge for them, of course, is not knowing exactly where that is and going too far because going too far will clearly provoke a response, as the President has proven earlier this year.

I am sorry. What was the second part of your question? Oh, the diplomatic part.

Look, are we going to be harmed by that? Absolutely. We have been harmed over the last three and a half years by our failure to have people in positions of authority at mid-levels in government and in senior positions in our embassies. We need people in Baghdad. We need people in Beirut. We need people—we did not have an ambassador in Saudi Arabia for the first 2 years of this administration. I believe that that harms not only our ability to conduct diplomacy but our ability to manage the challenge that Iran presents to us. Though some of those challenges have been remediated, we have an ambassador now in both places, and we have an Assistant Secretary for Near East Affairs, at the same time, there is no question that what you want is not a militarized answer to every challenge. What you want is militarized diplomacy backed up by that military.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you.

Mr. WILSON.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Chairman Trone, and thank you, too, for being here today.

Ms. Pletka, how would you assess the effectiveness of the United States sanctions on Iran, which have been courageously placed by President Donald Trump? Have you detected any changes in Iran's behavior since the maximum pressure campaign has begun? And how best can we help the people of Iran, who are the heirs of the extraordinary person culture?

Ms. PLETKA. Thank you for asking that question.

On the issue of sanctions, I think many of us who believed that an effort to reconstitute sanctions after the JCPOA would be very difficult, if not impossible, have been—the word I like to use is gobsmailed by how effective they have been.

The President and his team have done, I think by all accounts, an impressive job in putting together the most serious, the most biting campaign of sanctions that have been in place. Iran's foreign currency assets are diminished extraordinarily. Iran's currency has dropped precipitously. Iran's oil exports are below a quarter of a million barrels per day, which is their main source of income.

The only question there is, again, to what end. And you rightly followup with the question of how we can best help the people of Iran because these sanctions, while they impact the people of Iran, are, of course, focused on the regime of the Islamic Republic, not on the people of Iran. They are the victims of this regime and they will suffer alongside. How can we best help them?

You know we have never been terribly successful at answering that question, not since the end of the cold war. And I believe that if you, this committee, were to turn to that question, it would be hugely helpful to our policy because no matter what, even if these demonstrations that we are seeing in Iran are unlikely to lead to regime collapse, and I believe they are unlikely to lead to that, at the same time, we should know what it is that we hope will be there instead of the ayatollahs and the mullahs that are running the country right now.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you very much. It is also encouraging to see our E.U. allies now adjusting to openly embracing sanctions.

And Ms. Pletka, how should the U.S. alter its Lebanon policy in response to the new pro-Hezbollah Government? How does this change in our strategic posture toward Lebanon?

Ms. PLETKA. Lebanon is really a modern day tragedy and our failure to do more to limit Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon. Over successive administrations, nonpartisan criticism or bipartisan criticism is in place. Right now, what we are looking at is the replacement of a government that was a fig leaf for Hezbollah to a government that is plain Hezbollah. The implications for Israel, the implications for us, the implications for terrorism, and the implications for the Lebanese people are very serious.

What we need to do, again, is we need to work to isolate those inside Lebanon who have robbed the country blind with their corruption, who support terrorism, and who seek to drag Lebanon, as a victim, into war with Israel, at some point in the future. How we do that is partly the way we have so far, through sanctions but sanctions are a very blunt tool. We also need to empower and help

the people who are willing to stand up to Hezbollah. And there, I feel we have really fallen down on the job.

We have supported only the Lebanese military, believing that the Lebanese military is a key tool in fighting Sunna extremism. Well, it is but it is also a key tool in helping Hezbollah. We need a much more refined, much more directed policy that looks to empower good guys and to isolate and harm bad guys.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you.

And Dr. Tabatabai, what more can we do to support the popular protesters in Iraq?

Dr. TABATABAI. So I think that you know the U.S. role in supporting protesters should actually be fairly limited because, even though it is useful to help the flow of information, it is helpful to make statements encouraging and standing with people across the region. Ultimately, the decision for who should govern those countries is theirs and we should be fairly limited in how much we—how many statements we make in that direction.

Mr. WILSON. And thank you, as we conclude, again, I am just so proud of the President's courage to go and eliminate Soleimani. He killed, directly, hundreds of Americans with the IEDs. Thousands of Americans today have lost arms and legs. And so I appreciate so much the leadership of President Trump. Peace through strength.

Thank you.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you. Mr. Malinowski.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am actually not going to talk about the main issue of Soleimani today. I want to—I just want to focus on one thing that we all say we agree on, we all like to think we agree on, and that is our support for the people of Iran who are struggling against this dictatorship, struggling for freedom, the people of Iran who are saying that they want to be part of the world, particularly the younger people, the people of Iran who show their sentiments by refusing to walk over an American flag because they realize that that is just dumb propaganda from their regime and, again, they want to be part of the world and they want to be connected to us.

So we all say that we stand by them, and we congratulate ourselves for saying this, and we feel good about saying this. But here is what we are actually doing: The people of Iran, anyone who was born in Iran, is presumptively denied entry into the United States right now under a travel ban that makes zero sense from a national security point of view. Unless they get a waiver, they cannot come here.

On top of that, in the last several weeks, we have had incident, after incident, after incident of Iranians, particularly students, coming to the United States with visas, which means that they have been vetted thoroughly by the State Department, by DHS, passed every test. They arrive at an airport and some Border Patrol officer looks at them for 20 minutes and sends them back, without any consultation with other parts of the U.S. Government, destroys their lives because many of them have spent thousands of dollars making the journey to come to the United States. Some of them have been to the United States, studied here, and have just

left for a conference and are told, often degraded, often humiliated at airports, we do not want you here because you are Iranian.

Today, we are going to be passing a resolution in the House that says we stand by the people of Iran and their struggle for human rights. I am going to vote for that resolution because I agree with every word in it. It is sponsored by my friend, the chairman of this subcommittee. But I also think this resolution is, in some ways, shameful. We are going to be pretending today to stand by the people of Iran, even as this House, even as this Congress does not a damn thing about what the U.S. Government is actually doing.

Our actual policy right now is to hurt the people of Iran and that is what we need to be speaking about.

So I want to ask everybody here, our witnesses, whether you agree or disagree with what I just said. Is our current approach consistent with the lessons that we learned during the cold war, for example, when we took on the Soviet Union, when we took on their leaders, their regimes, while welcoming the freedom-loving people who lived behind the Iron Curtain who wanted to come to the United States, study here, learn from us? Are we doing the right thing and are we really standing by the people of Iran, as we conduct this policy?

Whoever wants to start but I would like to hear from all three of you.

Ms. KARLIN. Thank you, Congressman Malinowski.

I am in violent agreement with you and everything you just highlighted. If this were a priority, we would be emphasizing every day how corrupt the regime is. We would be facilitating internal communication. We would be bringing Iranians here. We would be finding ways to engage the Iranian people and we would have clarity on our messaging.

I think what you have heard from all three of us witnesses is that we are really confused about what the U.S. is trying to do. And if we are confused, that is particularly problematic.

Thank you.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you.

Dr. TABATABAI. Sir, yes, thank you. I am also completely in agreement with you and my colleague.

In addition to the travel ban and, of course, all the issues you highlighted at the border, there is also the humanitarian impact of sanctions that we should be thinking about. Yes, sanctions are designed, hopefully, to impose a cost on the regime but there are reports about issues pertaining to the shortage of medicine, and medical equipment, and goods in Iran.

So the average Iranian is also paying the price for the regime's maligned activities and policies. And that is something else that we should also be thinking about.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you.

Ms. PLETKA. Well, you know what I think about this. I do agree with you. I think restrictions on cultural visits and on educational visits by Iranian students and others is self-defeating.

I do hope that, in supporting things like this, that we are mindful that the Iranian Government does not control who gets to come here and who does not get to come here. What we want is an opportunity for the young people that we all keep talking about to ac-

tually have a chance to see what a democratic country looks like, and see what a better life looks like, and take that back home with them when they go. So I could not agree with you more.

I do think that this administration has done more than is appreciated on the question of supporting internal communications inside Iran. I think they have done more than I know we have done previously, in either Republican or Democratic Administrations, to stand by people who have been imprisoned by the Iranian regime, have done more to try to help get them out of prison.

On the other hand, there is much more that can be done. There are no sanctions on food and medicine, as you know. We should not allow them to exploit this. What I would love for us to do is what we did during the Soviet era, which is to elevate this as a matter that we discuss in every single meeting—I have said it before at this committee—when we talk about the human rights and human freedom of the Iranian people and about the predations of their government.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you.

Mr. TRONE. Mr. Chabot.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you, very much. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Karlin, I will begin with you, if I can. How would you expect the IRGC's regional operations to change without Soleimani at the helm?

Ms. KARLIN. Thank you for that question, Mr. Congressman.

Qasem Soleimani was important but he was not irreplaceable. The IRGC has been a tremendously effective organization, unfortunately, over decades and, also, despite financial pressures over the years, as well.

So I suspect there will be an effort to facilitate and deepen relationships with various groups. In particular, we saw Qasem Soleimani really oversaw this magnificent kind of knitting together of various clients in places like Syria. So his replacement will have to work on facilitating new and deeper relationships as well. That said, I do not expect any meaningful change whatsoever.

Thank you.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you very much.

Ms. Tabatabai—I hope I pronounced that right—I will go to you next. How do you expect Iran's relationship with the PMF, the so-called popular mobilization forces, to change without Muhandis in the picture?

Dr. TABATABAI. Yes, thank you. I have a similar answer. I think that the relationship is very strategic right now. As both the United States and Iran start to enter a new era of competition in Iraq, the PMF is going to be critical—a critical asset for Iran.

We have seen how closely Kataib Hezbollah has been following the Iranian lead over the past year, especially, and I suspect that that will continue to happen and Kataib Hezbollah, specifically, will continue to remain a tool by which Iran exercises pressure on the United States.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you very much.

Ms. Pletka, I will go to you next. First of all, I used to periodically, about once a year for a number of years, go and teach, lecture to students at the University of Dayton, just north of my district,

which is Cincinnati. And the professor there was a Father Pletka. And I was just curious if there is any relationship.

Ms. PLETKA. Nope, absolutely, none. The word Father is the dead giveaway for me, since that is not my religion.

Mr. CHABOT. Okay. Well, he was a great priest and a great guy.

But in any event, with the Soleimani strike, President Trump made clear that killing Americans was a very red line. Nevertheless, over the weekend you know we saw Iranian proxies hit our embassy in Baghdad with rockets. I think we assume that Iran was involved with this.

What, if any, adjustments would you recommend to the administration relative to deterrence and Iran?

Ms. PLETKA. Well, after the Soleimani strike, people said that the United States had restored deterrence in the region. I think that what is missing here is a sense of clarity about what those red lines actually are.

And you know what had happened in the runup to this was that the Iranians have been testing us over the last year or two, like your little brother—am I bugging you now? Am I bugging you now with successive escalations in strikes? And they finally went too far. That is not a really great way to run a relationship. It is better to have that clarity up front.

And so what we are looking at now, you know in the aftermath of the strike, is the Iranians, once again, trying to figure out what it is they can do.

Iranian proxies are now involved in this. The attacks on the Green Zone and on our facility in Baghdad are most likely coming from Iranian proxies. We should make no mistake, their ultimate instructions come from Tehran. But, at the same time, it is Iraqi forces that are doing this and I think they do not know exactly what we are going to do in response.

I would very much welcome the idea of the President standing up and being very clear about what it is that the United States is willing to tolerate and what it is not willing to tolerate and that he would not fall into the trap of saying and if you keep at this, we are going to withdraw troops, because, of course, that is the aim of the attacks in the first place.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you very much. And with the little bit of time I have left, I will followup, if I can, with another question.

In the past few months, we have seen popular frustration with Iran's influence and its proxies in Lebanon. How should we respond to these protests and the demands of the protesters? How can we be sympathetic and helpful without having it turned against us?

Ms. PLETKA. It is a good question because, obviously, you do not want people labeled as puppets but that is part of the risk that comes with the game. If we remember, during the cold war, all of the Soviet refuseniks and dissidents were labeled as American puppets because that is what dictatorships do to their opponents.

Inside Lebanon I think we have done a lamentable job in trying to fight against the corruption that has, frankly, not just ripped off money from the Lebanese people but ripped off money from the World Bank, ripped off money from USAID, and the American taxpayer. This is a systemic corruption that has taken place in the Government of Lebanon that is—and make no mistake, this is not

just Hezbollah involved in systemic corruption. That is why people are out in the streets. It is not for some political reason. It is because they are sick and tired of not having—do you realize that in Beirut, which is considered by some to be the prowess or the Switzerland of the Middle East, they do not have electricity 24 hours a day in some parts? That is because this government has been incapable of not lining its own pockets and doing the right thing in providing services.

The United States is not very good in helping fight against corruption. That goes for Iraq. That goes for Lebanon. And frankly, it goes for a lot of other places. We could really step it up in that area.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you. My time has expired.

Mr. Chairman, thank you.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you.

Mr. CONNOLLY.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am sorry our friend from Pennsylvania is still not here to deny that the killing of Soleimani was not an assassination really brings you know George Orwell to tears. What was it, a mercy killing, euthanasia by drone? It was an assassination. It was the targeting and killing of a foreign leader. Now, we can debate whether that is appropriate or warranted but it is what it is. And unfortunately, it is that kind of Orwellian behavior that characterizes all too much of what passes for a foreign policy in the Middle East.

We heard that it was, quote, incoherent to denounce the Soleimani strike and the abandonment of the Kurds in the same breath but, both have the same thing and character. And I will ask you, Dr. Karlin, to comment. No consultation with Congress. No coordination with allies. Absence of any kind of larger context for strategy. Damaging counter-ISIS operations and increasing threats to Americans. So both actions, though different in nature, had similar characteristics and consequences.

Your comment, Dr. Karlin.

Ms. KARLIN. Thank you for that question, Mr. Congressman. I could not agree with you more.

Look, we can all agree that Qasem Soleimani was a horrific human being who was detrimental to U.S. national security interests, period, full stop. There is no debate about that. Responsible for the deaths and at least the maiming of thousands of American Servicemen and women.

That said, it is still not clear why he was killed, when he was killed, and where he was killed. That is profoundly worrisome. So I think it makes sense to question why did that happen. What were we expecting? What do we expect to happen after that?

And also to note, as you do, sir, the confusion surrounding our relationship with the Kurds and our partners around the region. Any successes we have in this region are due to our partners in the region and also outside of the region, like the counter-ISIS coalition members, like our allies in Europe. When they are not sure what we are trying to do, then we cannot all work in lockstep in support of a coherent and sustainable policy.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Would you say that the unilateral renouncement of our own agreement, JCPOA, that was working all respects, might fit in that category?

Ms. KARLIN. I think it was profoundly unhelpful. I would have rather that we had worked with our close allies to try to get a pathway to another agreement.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Would you say that by abandoning JCPOA, nonetheless, it achieved the objectives of curbing bad Iranian behavior in the region?

Ms. KARLIN. I do not think we see much evidence of that.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Right.

Ms. KARLIN. And we see the U.S. standing alone.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Do you think sanctions have curbed their behavior in the region in Yemen, in Syria, in Iraq, and Lebanon?

Ms. KARLIN. I think sanctions have been unhelpful to them domestically but, at the end of the day, as we saw during the Iran-Iraq War, they will find a way to fund what they need to fund.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Yes.

Ms. KARLIN. Thank you.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Dr. Tabatabai, have we seen evidence of the curbing of bad Iranian behavior, from our point of view, bad, in the region, based on either sanctions or the withdrawal of the United States from JCPOA?

Dr. TABATABAI. Not in terms—not strategically, no. There may have been some tactical changes here and there. For example, they may have less money to send to various groups. But in terms of their activities and Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, et cetera, we continue to see a level of involvement, support for various groups.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I have a lot of respect for the ranking member, Mr. Wilson, who is also my friend, but when he talks about praising the President's peace with strength strategy, I would argue the opposite. There is plenty of evidence in front of us. There is no peace and, frankly, there is no strength. There is nothing but weakness and withdrawal of the United States from some strategic positioning in the region.

I want to give you an opportunity, and you as well, Dr. Karlin, if you want to comment on it. You mentioned the possible collapse of the regime. We need to get ready for that. I know Dr. Pletka also referenced that and said, and I agree with her, it is probably unlikely, at least in the near-term, but I want to give you an opportunity.

Why should we think the regime could actually collapse, given its staying power since 1979?

Dr. TABATABAI. Sir, I fully agree that it is the least likely scenario. However, I think that the United States should be prepared for all scenarios and that is one possible——

Mr. CONNOLLY. All right. Forgive me for interrupting. You were not suggesting that is something that could be imminent or in the near future.

Dr. TABATABAI. Absolutely not. No, absolutely not.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Right.

Dr. TABATABAI. I think it is the least likely scenario right now.

I should also add that it is not clear what would happen next, even if the regime were to collapse.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Right.

Dr. TABATABAI. There is a world in which there is a liberal democracy that replaces the Islamic Republic but there is also the possibility that we will see something like Syria, you know a civil war, or even a similar regime with different ideology to replace the current one.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Yes. This is a monumental subject and, of course, there is not a single person at the press table, on the subject of Iran, which is amazing, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Ranking Member, but thank you both for holding this hearing.

And thank you all for being here.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you.

Mr. WATKINS.

Mr. WATKINS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I think that General Soleimani was a righteous and justified kill. He, when looking for why, how about the 600 some-odd soldiers that he killed, our brothers and our sisters?

And also, the strategy is a credible deterrent. It is a far cry from the appeasement strategy that was proven to not work. It is a maximum pressure campaign. And having spent years at the tactical level, I assure you that, when you go out on missions, the ideas that, should anything happen to you, you want the enemy combatants knowing that hell fire will rain down upon them, should anything happen to you. And that is a credible deterrent and I assure you that it is far more effective than the hope that your Commander in Chief giving them money will somehow make them not want to kill you. That is ridiculous. It never works and it never will.

A credible deterrent and a maximum pressure campaign is far more effective, particularly in this part of the globe. So when I hear our guests ask, well, why kill him, because he was a combatant, as evident by the title that he preferred going by, which was general. So he was a high-ranking enemy combatant, probably over-seeing the violent attacks on the embassy, which he probably helped to orchestrate. So that is your why.

And the mere fact that he got paid in part by a government paycheck from Iran, which is the leading State-sponsor of terror, is a moot point. He was an enemy combatant in Iraq, outside of his country. So, I relish in the fact that he does not live to kill any more Americans.

Which when you ask well, what happens next? Well, how about the fact that they try and continue to kill us? That is what happens next. And the mere fact now that they have got one less operative, a very powerful and influential one at that, makes our job safer and easier.

Ms. Pletka, do you—what do you think the administration's strike on Soleimani will deter—do you think that the administration's strike on Soleimani will deter Iran's future operations in any way?

Ms. PLETKA. Sir, I think it has the capacity to do that. You know I do not think you are seeing anybody lament that the parting of Qasem Soleimani, although there are political disagreements about whether it was wise or not, I certainly do not, and believe the President was justified in this choice.

The question really for us is followup. And what we need from the administration is clarity. Because if you look at the run-up last year, you saw a number of attacks by Iran or by Iranian proxies on both American assets, the drone, but also on global oil supplies.

The United States has, through the last decades, no matter the President, had a doctrine of opposition to interference in the continuity of global energy supplies. The perceived failure of the President to respond to the attacks on Abqaiq and on Khurais in Saudi Arabia gave Iran the idea that he was not going to stand up to them.

Soleimani turned that around but we do not know what is next and I do think it is really important for the administration to clarify and to capitalize on the deterrence that was restored with that strike to tell the Iranians what it is we will and we will not tolerate because, otherwise, as you have seen over the last week, they will either directly, although much more likely through proxies, continue to test and see. And when they test us, we are likely to see Americans injured but, frankly, while Americans are my top priority, I do not want the Iranians killing anybody. They ought to stop.

Mr. WATKINS. Understood but you can see the escalation going from a drone to oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz, to an oil field attack in Saudi Arabia, to the killing of Americans. You would agree that there is some model of escalation there that represents this one, right? And so would you—what would your recommendation then be?

Ms. PLETKA. Well as I said, I mean I think that, again, I think that the Soleimani strike has managed to let's say halt momentarily that direct escalation. In other words, Iran using Iranian territory and Iranian forces to actually attack. What it has not done, unfortunately, is made clear to the Iranians that they cannot use their proxies to do the same thing and that is where I think we need to be wary.

Yesterday, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad was hit by several missiles. You know that is not a lesson learned and they need to learn that lesson. Otherwise, somebody else is going to get killed.

Mr. WATKINS. Mr. Chairman, I yield.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you.

Mr. KEATING.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Several years ago, I dined with some of our troops in Iraq, our soldiers. And just hours after we had dinner, several of them were killed with a rocket attack. It was an Iranian-powered rocket, almost certainly the handiwork of Soleimani. We do not mourn his death one iota.

I think for the purpose of this hearing, we have got to expand the way we are looking at the issue or we would just be lost. And here is what I want, particularly in response to Dr. Karlin's opening remarks that the administration needs to create a clear strategy and rebuild diplomatic relations with Iraq and move toward nuclear.

We have, right now, the administration saying they are going to continue maximum pressure strategy and today, even administration members saying to date that has not been successful.

Yet, we are also saying well, we have to engage them in discussions for new nuclear agreement, since we pulled out of the JCPOA. Well, it is contradictory. I mean how do you accomplish that? You cannot use a carrot and a stick at the same time. There is no clarity with that—the clarity you spoke to, Dr. Karlin.

So where do we go forward in the big picture here? We have a strategy to date that is not working. Meanwhile, Iran is moving forward and it is my belief, based upon what I can just estimate—I will leave it at that—that they are closer to a year, thanks to the JCPOA, than 6 months to a breakout but the clock is ticking.

So what we have, maximum pressure not working to date. Discussions about why we should have discussions about a nuclear agreement. The clock is ticking and pretty soon, every day they are closer to being a nuclear power. And the problem we have dealing with them is just going to be that much more difficult. Just look at North Korea.

So where do we go? Where is this clarity and how can you possibly move forward without making a decision?

Now, who are the intermediaries? I mean the Sultan of Oman passed away and he was an intermediary in the past. Can you suggest, Dr. Karlin, you know you were saying Congress should have a greater role but, with the administration with its contradictory carrot and stick approach and no clarity whatsoever, how do we go forward?

Ms. KARLIN. Thank you for that question, Mr. Congressman. We do need to acknowledge that it just has not been working, that increasingly the United States is standing alone, and that, problematically, the conversation is increasingly about the United States rather than about the Iranians. That is distracting and profoundly unhelpful.

So where we go is by starting to find some other allies. It is always better when more folks are on your team than not. So, I think—

Mr. KEATING. Yes, but our historic allies are in agreement with the JCPOA. They did not pull out.

Ms. KARLIN. Indeed.

Mr. KEATING. So that creates an enormous difficulty with them being intermediaries. They would be arguing against themselves.

Ms. KARLIN. Indeed and I think we probably need to make some sort of shift acknowledging that any discussions for a new nuclear agreement will be highly imperfect but it is a story where something is better than nothing. So working with the Germans, the Brits, the French, in particular, will be crucial.

I should emphasize that the administration has not done much to build a pathway to a new agreement and, moreover, the Russians appear to be the ones all over the Middle East.

Mr. KEATING. By the way, if I could, that is not getting us any closer because if we continue with maximum pressure, Iran is not going to negotiate with continued maximum pressure. We put them in a spot where their option seems to be let's go ahead with the nuclear plan, let's let our proxies act and we do not have contingencies in place to deal with that. And you know we have the sanctions but the Revolutionary Guard, they are getting money from the black market with the sanctions even. And I think you ad-

dressed they manage to get their money somehow. Well, that is one of the ways they do it. So these contradictions are there.

Don't you think the administration has to come to grips with selecting one avenue and pursuing it and not have these series of contradictions?

Ms. KARLIN. Well, maximum pressure increasingly sounds like regime change and it sounds like a test they just cannot pass. So, why try to even study for it?

So, effectively, I do think one can have a policy that mixes carrots and sticks, as long as it is nuanced and thoughtful, but if the Iranians feel like there is absolutely nothing they can do to meaningfully get the U.S. to shift, I do not see why they would do so.

Mr. KEATING. That is a problem and we will work as a Congress and a committee to try and delve into those issues. Thank you for being here.

But until we acknowledge the big picture here, we are going to continue to put ourselves perilously close to conflict and war.

Thank you.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you.

Mr. MAST.

Mr. MAST. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Have any of you all been in a fight, physical, or combat, or otherwise? Have you been in a fight? Have any of you been in a fistfight or in combat?

That is not rhetorical. I am asking.

Ms. PLETKA. I cannot speak for my colleagues but I certainly have been in a fight. Why do you ask?

Mr. MAST. Have you been in a fight?

Ms. KARLIN. In a fistfight?

Mr. MAST. Or combat?

Ms. KARLIN. Sure. Not in combat.

Mr. MAST. But a fistfight?

Dr. TABATABAI. Not that I recall.

Mr. MAST. Okay. So it is hypothetical for you, Doctor.

If somebody is fighting you and you hit them back, is that escalation or defense?

I will take your silence as exactly.

We were not escalating. We were defending ourselves against a terrorist who has gone out there and hit us time, and time, and time again.

Let me ask you something maybe you all can answer. When was the last time that Soleimani hit us before he ended up in about five separate pieces on the side of a tarmac?

Ms. KARLIN. I do not know, Mr. Congressman, that anyone is debating how awful he was or how many Servicemen and women he has—whose deaths he may be responsible—

Mr. MAST. People are but that is not my question.

When was the last time he hit us?

Ms. KARLIN. He was consistently hitting us.

Mr. MAST. No. When was the last time he hit us? When was the very last time that Soleimani hit us?

Ms. KARLIN. Consistently up until his death.

Mr. MAST. So right up until his death, he was hitting us. You agree with that. His last actions, right before his death, was hitting the United States of America.

Ms. KARLIN. I think there is no debate that up until the end of his life, Qasem Soleimani was working against U.S. national security interests.

Mr. MAST. But what about his last actions, literally? I mean you guys are Director of Strategic Studies, political scientists, foreign and defense policy studies. You guys study this. What was his last act of terrorism before we ended his life on the side of a tarmac?

Ms. PLETKA. None of us have security clearances. I think what we are all aware of is that he was coordinating the attacks on the American embassy.

Mr. MAST. It is open source information. You do not need a security clearance to know that.

Ms. PLETKA. What I am aware of is that he was coordinating attacks on the American embassy, with the leadership of the popular mobilization forces, the Hashd al-Shaabi.

That is what I know. I do not know whether my colleagues have better knowledge.

Mr. MAST. So right up until his last moment, he was hitting us. He was attacking us. And you all are coming in here saying there is some kind of escalation that is going on. You do not think if somebody was hitting us right up until the last second that is defense? This academic approach to defense I find absolutely worthless.

Let's go to some other questions here.

What was the imminent threat that was posed by Osama bin Laden when we executed him? What was the imminent threat that was posed by him while he was hiding out in his compound in Pakistan? Was there an imminent threat? Was there any intel about he was planning something immediately?

More crickets.

Was he executed within borders that the U.S. had an authorized use of military force to go into?

Ms. KARLIN. If I may, I do not recall that the Obama Administration argued that Osama bin Laden was being killed due to an imminent threat. So it is really just a question of justification. And I think where we are a little confused is that the Trump Administration has given us about 17 different reasons why Qasem Soleimani has been killed. And all of them may be accurate. I am just not sure which.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Who posed a greater threat at the time of their death, bin Laden or Soleimani?

More crickets. I think it is because you all do not want to answer these questions. So, I am not going to—

Ms. PLETKA. No, it is not because we do not want to answer the questions. It is—

Mr. MAST [continuing]. End with this statement right here right now.

I think I find this whole conversation is just an exercise in you folks being trapped in a cold war policy purgatory, where you not recognizing that we have moved out of this ladder of escalation, as

you all are talking about. Oh, you need to have this designated exactly. They know what we are going to do if we see them do this.

That is not the way that it works. It is okay to have selective ambiguity. It is okay that they be surprised by the actions. And it is good for foreign policy for them to not know exactly the way the President is going to hit them. That is strength.

And in that, I appreciate the fact that you all took the time to come here, although I found its worth to be minimal.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you.

Mr. VARGAS.

Mr. VARGAS. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I thank the ranking member and the witnesses here today.

I do want to ask a few more questions, if I could, with respect to the maximum pressure campaign. I think it was stated here today it was helpful domestically or unhelpful domestically, in the sense of us putting pressure domestically not on other operations internationally in the region.

Could you talk a little bit more about that, whomever would like to? Yes, Doctor, to ahead.

Dr. TABATABAI. Sure, yes. Thank you, sir.

So I think in terms of creating grievances, deepening grievances that exist in Iran, it has certainly done that. There are people are upset with how things are going. A lot of the economic grievances are, of course, tied to the regime's own incompetence, mismanagement but the sanctions certainly have an impact.

I think the key question that we should be asking ourselves, though, because hopefully we are not in the business of hurting countries for the sake of hurting countries, but in order to achieve our objectives, is what are the objectives we are trying to achieve and is maximum pressure helping us get to that point.

And I certainly think that in terms of a strategic impact, we have not seen that yet.

Mr. VARGAS. Would you agree with that, Ms. Pletka?

Ms. PLETKA. I think we have seen a strategic impact. What we are not going to see is, from one strike, the Iranians changing what is, essentially, the gravamen of their foreign policy.

Iranian foreign policy has, for the last at least three decades, if not really since the inception of the Islamic Republic, been structured around indirect conflict, rather than direct, except for the Iran-Iraq War.

Mr. VARGAS. But——

Ms. PLETKA. So the notion that they would toss that by the wayside after the death of Qasem Soleimani is unlikely.

Mr. VARGAS. But no, I think you may have misunderstood——

Ms. PLETKA. I am sorry.

Mr. VARGAS [continuing]. Or misheard my question.

Ms. PLETKA. I apologize.

Mr. VARGAS. It was not the strike at all.

Ms. PLETKA. Oh.

Mr. VARGAS. No. My question was on the issue of maximum pressure campaign.

So the maximum pressure campaign, it does seem to have done something internally in the country in that you do see more pro-

tests. You do see that there is some disruption, certainly by some. I mean I think it is——

Ms. PLETKA. My apologies.

Mr. VARGAS. That is okay. I know you were so focused but go ahead and try and answer it.

Ms. PLETKA. Still the same answer, which is that I think we have seen some impact in terms of Iran's ability to continue to fund its proxies. When Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah goes out and starts begging for money, that is probably good news for people who hate terrorism and that certainly has had an impact. We have seen that they have not been able to support, they have not been able to—they have not been able to meet payroll in certain instances.

There is no question that when the Islamic Republic is forced to choose to spend money on these proxy forces and does not, that that is a good thing for us. Does that mean that they are going to abandon the entire *raison d'être* of their foreign policy, which is the use and building up of these proxies? No, it does not but it has made it much harder. And it has, I think—I think there is persuasive evidence that it has made an issue of it internally because people do resent the notion that they are paying other guys to fight in Syria, which is not, by I think in the view of most Iranians, critical to their interests, that they are paying other people to fight for Assad when they are not spending at home.

Mr. VARGAS. Dr. Karlin, what do you think?

Ms. KARLIN. I think it has an effect, however, when I look at the two buckets of concern I have with Iranian policy, there is the nuclear file and there is the bad behavior regionally file, effectively, the Iranians are doing pretty well on both of those.

So at the strategic level, I do not think we have seen the change that we need to.

Thank you.

Mr. VARGAS. Yes, the concern I have always had, of course, is the nuclear side. And I, personally, did not think that the deal that we had with them was a great deal. I was one of the first people to come out against it on the Democratic side. However, there was, I think, some good that was for the 15 years. It was the second 15 years and beyond I think was a disaster. But there is nothing in place now at all, which I think is even worse, obviously, but we have to do something.

And last, I guess I would just throw this out. I certainly would always think of Iran and Iraq as counterbalances when Saddam Hussein was there. You even seen the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 I think to 1988, where it was sort of a stalemate and huge losses on both sides but certainly, in my own opinion, two very rough, difficult, maybe tyrannical groups fighting against each other there, the political politicians and the armies.

But there is no counterbalance yet that is proximate to that country. In fact just the opposite now, it seems that Iraq is cozying up to it and that is a real problem.

Any quick comments? I know my time is about up.

Dr. TABATABAI. Yes, I certainly would agree that since 2003, Iran has had less of a challenge from Iraq and, in fact, it has been able

to expand its influence in Iraq, largely thanks to us toppling Saddam.

Mr. VARGAS. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. PLETKA. But we do not miss Saddam Hussein, we should underscore.

Mr. VARGAS. Excuse me?

Ms. PLETKA. We do not miss Saddam Hussein.

Mr. VARGAS. Don't miss Saddam Hussein?

Ms. PLETKA. No.

Mr. VARGAS. I do not miss him at all.

Ms. PLETKA. No, and neither do we. We should underscore that.

Mr. VARGAS. He was one of the bad guys. I just remember strategically there was a counterbalance but I do not miss any of those guys.

Mr. DEUTCH [presiding]. All right, thank you, Mr. Vargas.

I will recognize myself for 5 minutes. Welcome to the witnesses. I am sorry that I was delayed.

Later today, Ranking Member Wilson and I will join our colleagues on the House floor to consider H. Res. 752, a resolution supporting the rights of the Iranian people to free expression and condemning the regime for its crackdown on legitimate protests, the violent crackdown, the crackdown on expression, the shutting down of the internet.

I want to also take a moment to thank my friend, Mr. Malinowski, for his powerful comments about the abhorrent U.S. policy toward Iranians who want to come to this country. And I would like to just ask a question to you about that.

Dr. Tabatabai, the United States recently barred Iranians from accessing E1 and E2 nonimmigrant visas that allow foreign nationals to enter the United States to engage in international trade or to invest capital. Of course, the administration barred all immigrant visas to Iranians in early 2017.

What do—how do we make sense of what we are going to be doing on the House floor later, standing with the Iranian people and the bans that are in place? Can you just—they are, as Mr. Malinowski points out, they are so utterly inconsistent but I would love your insight.

Dr. TABATABAI. Yes, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I think those two things are somewhat contradictory, to say the least. On the one hand, we are saying that we stand with the Iranian people in their fight against their own tyrannical regime. On the other hand, we are barring them from entering the country, I would agree, on very thin grounds, when it comes to national security concerns. And in fact, I think allowing that these students who have gone through the process to have been deemed as not posing a challenge, a threat to U.S. national security, allowing them to come to this country to study at top universities, as many of them have been accepted, is good for our image. It allows them to be exposed to different ways of thinking, to experience democracy firsthand. And ultimately, it allows them to contribute to our economy as well.

So I think that it is a positive thing to allow them to come here and I think that it is very important, if we are saying that we are

standing with the Iranian people, that we are also putting our money where our mouth is.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you.

Ms. Pletka, isn't there some—isn't there a benefit, at the same time that we are expressing our support for the Iranian people and their desire for democracy to allow them to be exposed to democracy here?

Ms. PLETKA. Congressman Malinowski raised this with all three of us—

Mr. DEUTCH. Yes.

Ms. PLETKA [continuing]. Before you were able to be here and I said exactly what I am about to say again, which is it is completely inconsistent. While we need to be mindful about both national security questions because Iranians have tried to conduct terrorism on our soil, and have tried to, and have looked to supply their nuclear and missile program with purchasers here in the United States, at the same time, if we are mindful, if we are not good enough to keep those guys out and let the right people in, then shame on us.

Mr. DEUTCH. I could not agree more. Thank you.

In my remaining time, I just want to spend a moment talking about what all of this means to our efforts to try to free Americans and other foreign nationals that the Iranians hold hostage and that includes my constituent, Bob Levinson, who was abducted nearly 13 years ago.

The tensions that exist now obviously effect negotiations over American citizens who have been wrongly detained or held hostage. And I would open this to any of you, diplomatic channels that discuss hostages and a potential off-ramp or an opportunity to deescalate tensions is critical. Is it your sense, any of you, that that exists? How much harder is that now?

Ms. Pletka, we will start with you.

Ms. PLETKA. There is a diplomatic channel to discuss hostages and it resulted in the release of a Princeton student who was being illegally held inside Iran. It resulted in the first information we have had, actually, about Bob Levinson in some time. It is one of the contradictions of this administration, perhaps, that it has been, I think, unusually successful and unusually diligent in trying to—in paying attention to both Americans and others imprisoned in regimes like Iran's.

So actually, that is a hopeful sign.

Mr. DEUTCH. Dr. Tabatabai.

Dr. TABATABAI. Yes, if I may, just one more point to add to this, which is that we also have allies, the U.K., Australia, and other countries, France, who have dual nationals and their own nationals who are held in Iran.

So this is one more avenue where we should be working with our allies because they share our interest there.

Mr. DEUTCH. Dr. Karlin.

Ms. KARLIN. I have nothing to add, sir.

Mr. DEUTCH. I think your assessment is exactly right. I would simply make the request of you, as I make everyone who appears here that every amount of credit that we give to the administration and others that the administration works with on being diligent

and focusing on this issue, as we focus on those efforts, let's also acknowledge the fact that it will—none of those efforts will be deemed fully successful until everyone has the opportunity to return home, including my constituent, Bob Levinson. And it is a point I have made to the administration and continue to, just as I have to the prior administration, and everyone who has been involved in this.

I thank you very much for being here and, again, I apologize for my delay.

Mr. Wilson.

Mr. WILSON. Yes, thank you, Chairman Deutch. And as we conclude, certainly in a bipartisan manner, we can recognize that Nawres Hamid, an Iraqi American was killed by an Iranian rocket on December 27th. It was 5 days later that Soleimani was killed. And so the context needs to be placed and not to forget Nawres Hamid, who was buried in California, I would say an appreciated Iraqi American Muslim.

Thank you.

Mr. DEUTCH. Well again, thanks very much to the witnesses. I appreciate your being here. Thank you for your testimony.

Members of the subcommittee, as you all know, may have some additional questions and we ask you to please respond to those questions in writing. And I would ask my colleagues that any questions for the hearing be submitted to the subcommittee clerk within five business days.

And with that, this meeting is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:34 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

**SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128**

**Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism**

**Ted Deutch (D-FL), Chairman**

January 28, 2020

**TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held by the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>):

**DATE:** Tuesday, January 28, 2020

**TIME:** 10:00 am

**SUBJECT:** Escalation with Iran: Outcomes and Implications for U.S. Interests and Regional Stability

**WITNESSES:** Mara Karlin, Ph.D.  
Director of Strategic Studies  
Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies  
*(Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development, U.S. Department of Defense)*

Ariane Tabatabai, Ph.D.  
Associate Political Scientist  
RAND Corporation  
Adjunct Senior Research Scholar  
Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs

Ms. Danielle Pletka  
Senior Fellow in Foreign and Defense Policy Studies  
American Enterprise Institute  
Andrew H. Siegel Professor on American Middle Eastern Foreign Policy  
Georgetown University Walsh School of Foreign Service

**By Direction of the Chairman**

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

# COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism HEARING

Day Tuesday Date 01/28/2020 Room 2172

Starting Time 10:04 AM Ending Time 11:34 AM

Recesses 0 (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ ) (\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ )

Presiding Member(s)

*Vice Chairman David Trone, Chairman Theodore E. Deutch*

*Check all of the following that apply:*

Open Session ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Stenographic Record ☒

Televised ☒

TITLE OF HEARING:

*Escalation with Iran: Outcomes and Implications for U.S. Interests and Regional Stability*

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

*See Attached*

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: *(Mark with an \* if they are not members of full committee.)*

*Scott Perry, PA*

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

*(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)*

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: *(List any statements submitted for the record.)*

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE \_\_\_\_\_

or

TIME ADJOURNED 11:34 AM

  
Subcommittee Staff Associate

# HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

## SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING

### SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

<i>PRESENT</i>	<i>MEMBER</i>
X	Theodore E. Deutch, FL
	Gerald E. Connolly, VA
X	David Cicilline, RI
	Ted Lieu, CA
	Colin Allred, TX
X	Tom Malinowski, NJ
X	David Trone, MA
	Brad Sherman, CA
X	William Keating, MA
X	Juan Vargas, CA

<i>PRESENT</i>	<i>MEMBER</i>
X	Joe Wilson, SC
X	Steve Chabot, OH
	Adam Kinzinger, IL
	Lee Zeldin, NY
X	Brian J. Mast, FL
X	Brian K. Fitzpatrick, PA
X	Guy Reschenthaler, PA
X	Steve Watkins, KS