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Testimony before House Committee on Foreign Affairs

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Mr. Chairman, Congressman Engel, members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to address this distinguished body and to offer my perspective on the Nuclear Agreement with Iran, potential long-term implications of the deal on regional stability and how to effectively respond to Iran's global malign activities.

This is an important issue because Iran has accumulated a very large quantity of enriched uranium and is, by many accounts, near the threshold of nuclear weapons capability. This emerging capacity, when coupled with virulent anti-Western rhetoric and a long record of malign activities, presents a very real threat to U.S. interests

Iranian bad behavior abroad, spearheaded by the IRGC Qods Force and executed mainly by their proxies, has fomented regional instability and attacked U.S. personnel and interests around the world, actions which I witnessed firsthand in Lebanon in the early 1980s and in Iraq and Afghanistan when I was Commander, U.S. CENTCOM. I am under no illusions regarding Iranian government behavior since the Islamic Revolution and believe that some elements in that country would be very pleased to possess nuclear weapons.

It is precisely this near term potential to achieve a nuclear weapons capability that presents the most serious challenge with Iran. Notwithstanding many grievances and intolerable activity by Iranian agents in places around the world, the most pressing issue for America, Israel and our Middle East allies, is the very real possibility that Iran may soon acquire a nuclear weapon.

To address this looming threat, representatives of the international community (U.S., UK, France, Germany, China, Russia and the EU) have been negotiating with Iran for many months with one key objective, to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The resulting Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in my opinion, offers a good chance to do just that and is far superior to the status quo alternative, which would leave Iran with a massive stockpile of enriched uranium, no first hand scrutiny of ongoing nuclear related activities and if this Deal is rejected, new motivation to accelerate their efforts.

I have scrutinized the agreement, support it and recommend your approval of the JCPOA. Frankly, I was positively surprised but pleased that the many diverse interests represented in the negotiations could coalesce in agreement in a document that on balance gives us a very reasonable way forward. But, I want to be perfectly clear about a most important reality; neither we, nor the Iranians really trust each other to actualize all features of the Deal.

A positive aspect of the agreement is that after more than 36 years of open hostility and lack of substantive discussion on any issue, the two sides came to an agreed way ahead in an area of utmost importance. The negative is the devil in the detail and implementation will require close scrutiny and verification at every step.

The most important strength of the Deal is the broad international agreement on the priority of stopping Iran's march toward nuclear weapons and the diverse group of countries which have signed and pledged to support it. Other key points are the removal of 98% of the enriched uranium stockpile and dismantling of the majority of the centrifuges. These two steps, in concert with close scrutiny and verification by the IAEA of all known nuclear related sites in Iran, along with all aspects of the nuclear supply chain, will effectively block a uranium path to a weapon. Neutralizing the Arak heavy water reactor will likewise eliminate the second (plutonium) path to a bomb.

The agreement will put in place a rigorous inspection and verification program with, in many cases, on site, around the clock monitoring which will last for varying time frames from 10 years to perpetuity. The technical aspects of the agreement are comprehensive and well thought out. To address past and present areas of concern, collectively known as Possible Military Dimensions (PMD) of Iranian activity, the IAEA and Iran have signed a "Roadmap for Clarification of Past and Present Outstanding Issues". This confidential (between Iran and the IAEA) agreement and a separate arrangement on the Parchin site must be concluded to the satisfaction of the IAEA prior to Implementation Day and any sanctions relief.

A weakness of the Agreement is that there does not appear to be any practically effective way to monitor or verify small scale Iranian misbehavior, should they choose to continue or resume non-nuclear, weapons related activities such as

warhead or centrifuge development. Likewise, full resolution of PMD suspicions is unlikely as it would depend on Iranian admission of possible past violations of the NPT and Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement. And historically, the IAEA has not been seen as the most aggressive entity in pursuing scofflaws.

The up to 24 day access procedure is a cause for concern but will only apply to undeclared and suspicious sites, with immediate access available at known sites. However, trace amounts of fissionable material are very difficult to hide, and the "Snap Back" provision of the Agreement should be a powerful disincentive to counter potential violations.

Regarding long term implications of the agreement on regional stability, I assess there is good potential for positive development. The most important issue, the imminent threat of an Iranian Nuclear Weapon, is forestalled, easing high anxiety in the Region and with Israel.

The suspension of sanctions will increase economic activity and personal travel in the region, boosting interaction with the Iranian population, resulting in pressure to normalize state to state relationships. The potential for confidence building, and possibly even trust, between Iran and the international community as implementation proceeds, could initiate a more pragmatic political dynamic inside Iran to address the unrest and frustrations of the population, the majority under age 30.

Much will depend on Iranian behavior toward its neighbors and whether it continues to instigate the Shia minorities to confront the Sunni majority leadership in many Gulf countries. In Iraq, there is some overlap in interests as U.S. and Iranian forces assist the government of PM Haider al-Abadi in the struggle with ISIS but Iran seems determined to maintain strong influence with Baghdad.

The Middle East, an area of high interest to us for many reasons, continues to be buffeted by challenges which have vexed years of U.S. attempts to improve stability in the area. Nonetheless, we should continue to engage in the region, using all aspects of national power, but with the understanding that we are not likely to be successful by mandating U.S. solutions. People in the region are sooner or later going to have to step up and address the issues which torment and divide them. We can and should assist but we are not going to resolve their problems.

In addressing Iran's malign activities globally, we should make clear at every opportunity that cooperation with Iran in the current Nuclear Weapons issue will not in any way excuse or cause us to ignore Iranian bad behavior in other areas. Having demonstrated our sincerity in the JCPOA negotiation and the example of benefit from international cooperation, we could explore additional opportunities of mutual interest while maintaining vigilance and a firm line on potentially destabilizing Iranian actions.

Strengthening our ties to the GCC and encouraging collective security efforts by these nations, supported with consistent engagement by U.S. forces should reassure these countries of American resolve and disabuse them of any notion that we might be aligning with Iranian interests in the region.

The significant current disagreement between the U.S. and Israel regarding the approach to Iran is recognized as a difference in the priority of national interests and should be addressed with a continued strong U.S. commitment to Israeli security.

In summary, the JCPOA is a unique opportunity to address one of the most pressing issues of international security and stability. This agreement has been painstakingly negotiated in concert with allies and other parties and I believe offers the most reasonable and likely way ahead to forestall an Iranian nuclear weapon for the next decade or more. It may not satisfy every aspiration, but I have heard no credible alternative proposal. American initiative and persistence enabled the parties to come to agreement and our continued leadership will be essential for successful implementation. I recommend Congressional support with continued engagement to enable implementation and verification of the many complex and critical aspects of the agreement.

Thank you. I will be pleased to address specific questions you may have.