

House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing: “A Return to Maximum Pressure: Comprehensively Countering the Iranian Regime's Malign Activities,” 1 April 2025.

Norman Roule - Non-resident Senior Advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies Warfare, Irregular Threats, and Terrorism Program

Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Meeks, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear today. Tehran has used its nuclear program and development of regional militias and terrorist operations as the foundation of its power projection for more than two decades. Its operations resulted in multiple, lethal, and dramatic operations against Americans and our partners. Iran is responsible for the loss of hundreds of American lives and tens of thousands of lives in the Middle East. Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force has left a path of destruction that has cost the Middle East a generation of hope and progress. Tehran’s involvement in these operations has been routinely acknowledged by multiple countries and in various fora. But it has evaded consequences sufficient to change this strategy, in part, due to a concern that it would respond to significant retaliation by undertaking the final steps needed to acquire a nuclear weapon. Thus, Iran’s nuclear program and its proxy campaigns have become entwined as Iran’s malign sword and shield against its neighbors and the international community.

There have been many Iran-related briefings before this committee and its counterparts over the years. Most have told a story of Iran gradually building on its aggressive capabilities while successfully testing international red lines. Today’s briefing will be different. The events of the past year have significantly altered the strategic landscape, presenting policy options that hold the promise of real change.

I would like to begin with a brief update on the status of Iran’s nuclear and proxy programs. I will then comment on how Tehran likely perceives its strategic situation and its available diplomatic options. I will close with some considerations for policymakers.

First, a brief overview of Iran’s nuclear program status – Iran’s Shield.

Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Gabbard stated at the 25 March 2025 Annual Threat Assessment Hearing that the Intelligence Community (IC) continues to assess that Iran is not building a nuclear weapon and that Supreme Leader Khamenei has not authorized the nuclear weapons program that he suspended in 2003. The IC does report a significant increase in Iranian public discussion of the issue of nuclear weapons acquisition, likely emboldening nuclear weapons advocates within Iran’s decision-making apparatus. The International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) 26 February 2025 quarterly report on Iran does not contradict the DNI’s statement, but it is alarming in three areas:

First, the IAEA notes that Iran continues to expand its production of 60 percent enriched uranium. Uranium enriched to this level represents a significant step, dramatically reducing the time required to complete the enrichment cycle and produce fissile material

for a nuclear weapon. The IAEA could not be clearer: “The significantly increased production and accumulation of high enriched uranium by Iran, the only non-nuclear weapon state to produce such nuclear material, is of serious concern.”

Iran appears capable of producing its first quantity of 90 percent enriched uranium sufficient for one nuclear weapon in about a week. Tehran’s current stock of 60 percent enriched uranium is now sufficient for six or seven nuclear weapons. Absent international action and assuming use of Iran’s entire stock of enriched uranium and centrifuge capacity, some experts believe Iran could produce fissile material sufficient for approximately ten nuclear weapons in a month.

Second, Iran continues to increase the number and sophistication of its centrifuge cascades. This is important because it would allow Iran to accelerate any potential weaponization should it choose to take this step. Advanced centrifuges also enrich more quickly with fewer centrifuges, which could impact the design of any potential covert enrichment facility.

Last, Iran continues to hamper IAEA efforts to verify its existing nuclear program, which, absent solid intelligence, must reduce our confidence that we will be able to detect any possible diversion of nuclear material or equipment to a covert weapons program. The absence of transparency comes at a time when Iran’s program is growing in scale, complexity, and opportunities for potential covert activity. Despite increasingly tough talk from the IAEA Board of Governors, such as its November 2024 censure of Iran, Tehran is likely to continue to deny the IAEA the access it requires and will threaten to reduce access further in the face of any further IAEA pressure.

In short, Iran looks very much like a country developing a nuclear weapons program, albeit one which has yet to make the final decision because it either believes it will face discovery and ruinous military consequences or that the current approach offers significant diplomatic leverage beyond that found in a weapon. If the latter case ever becomes reality, Iran will likely make the final dash to weaponization when it believes it can do so securely and successfully.

Although outside the subject of this hearing, I note that Iran’s long-range ballistic missile program also looms as a threat to the U.S. and all our partners. During his testimony on March 26, 2025, U.S. Strategic Command General Anthony Cotton stated that Iran’s work on space launch vehicles likely shortens the timeline to produce an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) due to the similarities in technology. Much like Iran’s nuclear program, Iran appears to be using the mask of civilian activity to build a strategic weapons threat, in this case one that could also be a means to deliver a nuclear weapon.

Allow me to now speak briefly about Iran’s proxy program – Iran’s Sword.

Proxy operations offer the Islamic Republic the promise of significant regional influence at a low cost and with minimal consequence. For years, Iran’s seniormost leaders have

routinely sat with foreign terrorists and militia leaders and boasted of their material support to these groups. The international community has publicly displayed tons of weapons that have been targeted against tens of thousands of civilians from almost every country in the world living in the Middle East, Ukraine, or operating commercial shipping in international waters. The United States routinely acknowledges that Iran has been behind the deaths of hundreds of Americans in Iraq, attacks on our embassies, and terrorist attacks against Americans abroad and in the Homeland. Iran provided or enabled the hundreds of missiles and drone attacks conducted by the Houthis in the Red Sea, threatening our war fighters, killing civilian mariners, and inflicting untold billions of dollars of damage on the world economy.

The dramatic changes in the Middle East present significant opportunities to foster long-term and positive transformations that will weaken Iran's influence and enhance regional peace and stability. As a result of Israeli actions in Lebanon, Gaza, and Syria, and U.S. actions in Yemen, especially over the past two weeks, Iran's regional proxy groups no longer represent a strategic threat. However, the groups continue to exist along with Iran's proxies in Iraq, militants such as Bahrain's Al-Ashtar Brigade, and remnants of its Afghan and Pakistani proxies from Syria. It is difficult to overstate the priority of ensuring that these groups are not allowed to recover. The Middle East is witnessing many positive changes in countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Bahrain. Any weakening of Iran's malign adventurism will strengthen the ability of these long-time American partners to bring peace, prosperity, and political engagement to a troubled region.

The Quds Force remains largely intact and well-resourced. Quds Force leadership likely believes its damaged proxy partners can be revived over time and is prepared to provide them with funds, cyber assistance, training, and political support. Quds Force weapons routinely involve systems capable of mass casualties against civilian targets, such as ballistic missiles, drones, naval mines, and explosive boats. Iran also utilizes its proxies as trainers in other countries. We have seen numerous reports of Lebanese Hezbollah in Yemen and troubling reports of Houthis seeking to establish themselves in Syria, Iraq, and East Africa. The U.S. and our partners must show Iran that this cruel artery of violence will not be revived.

Quds Force operations in the Red Sea basin and the region surrounding the Bab al-Mandab give Tehran direct influence over global trade and energy markets. This ambition has driven the Quds Force to share multiple missile and drone systems with the Houthis. There is every reason to expect that the sophistication and lethality of these weapons will increase if Iran is allowed to re-establish its logistics connections with Yemen. There have also been reports that Iran seeks a permanent presence in the Red Sea basin through a port agreement with Sudan. Iran's goals likely include long-term influence of the Red Sea transportation route, as well as the ability to establish militant training sites and weapons transshipment centers in East Africa to threaten the western Arabian peninsula, Israel, and the east Mediterranean.

However, Iran's proxy architecture has vulnerabilities that can be exploited. Diplomatic

and economic sanctions are important, but they must be consistent and meaningful. Our first step should be to insist that partners tighten Iran's diplomatic isolation. Europe cannot condemn Iran's provision of drones to Russia that have led to the death of innocent Ukrainians and missiles to Houthis which have damaged Europe's economy and then provide Iran's now former Vice-President for Strategic Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif a high-profile propaganda session at the World Economic Forum in Davos as it did in January of this year.

If the Quds Force is to behave like a terrorist organization, the architecture and personnel of its logistics, training, and transportation system should be treated accordingly. Yemen offers our first opportunity to change this calculus. No Quds Force officer in Yemen involved in enabling Houthi lethal operations against U.S. personnel should consider himself safe. Historically, Iran has shown a reluctance to risk its personnel for proxy interests. Iran responded to severe casualties in Syria in 2013 by reducing the number and role of its personnel in that battleground. Any reduction of Quds Force personnel in proxy territory will decrease the efficiency, organization, and lethality of the proxy.

I would like to speak briefly about how the world likely appears to Tehran, and what we might infer from its past behavior regarding its future choices.

There is no question that Iran's leaders understand the Islamic Republic is more vulnerable to military attack than at any time in the last two decades. The October 2024 Israeli strikes on Iran demonstrated that Iran's air defenses could not deter Israel or protect key Iranian installations (or leaders). The Israeli strikes and Iran's failed counterattacks also showed Tehran (and other adversaries) the overwhelming power of U.S. military technology. The strength and smooth coordination of regional air defense actors demonstrated the results of years of work by U.S. military leaders and their regional counterparts, who built relationships that enabled this historic success. With the loss of its only and impotent state ally Syria, Iran stands alone.

Iran's leaders must also consider their exposure to Israel's formidable intelligence apparatus. In addition to the precision of Israel's air strikes on Iran and Iranian personnel in Syria in April 2024, Tehran watched the extraordinary pager operation by which Israel decimated Hezbollah cadres and the killings of such security-minded terrorists as Ismail Haniya, Yahya Sinwar, and Hasan Nasrallah. The actions were built on a record that included the 2018 Israeli seizure of Iran's nuclear cache and years of reports of precision attacks against Iranian officials and missile and nuclear facilities. Together, these actions imply a considerable degree of Israeli insight into sensitive Iranian and Iranian proxy facilities and leadership locations.

Much has been said of Iran's domestic woes, and they deserve brief comment. Iran's economy has been sustained, in large part, by oil exports to China. Under renewed U.S. sanctions pressure, Iran's currency has collapsed against the dollar, reaching historic lows on a near-weekly basis. Iran's recently dismissed Finance Minister admitted that over the past seven years, an additional ten million Iranians fell below the poverty line.

Inflation hovers around 35 percent. The economic hardship is all the harsher for Iranians who compare their lifestyle to that of the citizens of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, who are experiencing a social and economic renaissance a short distance away. Iran's foreseeable economic outlook is likely to be bleak.

Unsurprisingly, the Islamic Republic is deeply unpopular within Iran. Election turnout, once a source of pride for the regime, has become a political embarrassment. The regime bears a strong resemblance to the late Soviet Union, a revolutionary government whose ideology is dismissed by even its most loyal supporters but whose leaders continue to parrot loyalty to the system. However, Tehran's most significant challenge lies ahead. Iran's revolutionary generation is quickly fading. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei will be 86 years old this month. It remains an open question whether—and how—Iran's leaders will retain power during the transition to the first post-revolutionary generation of leadership.

Yet, although Iran's situation is dire, some of the challenges it faces do have precedents. Tehran's leadership is likely to draw upon past experiences in the coming months as it devises strategies to respond to U.S., regional, and domestic pressures.

In 2002-2003 and 2013-2014, Tehran faced the threat of a Western military attack, as well as regional turbulence that presented both profound threats and opportunities. Domestically, the Islamic Republic dealt with economic decline, political unrest, and periods of widespread unrest. During each period, the U.S. and Europe used sanctions to pressure Iran to halt its nuclear expansion and offered negotiations as a path towards sanctions relief. The global scene was marked by increasingly complex and sometimes contentious relations among the U.S., Europe, Russia, and China. Further, American public opinion was unenthusiastic about launching a new war in the Middle East.

Tehran's priority in each example was the preservation of the regime and the avoidance of military conflict with the U.S. The risk of conflict was real. The Iraq and Afghan Wars placed thousands of U.S. military personnel on both sides of Iran. The risk of U.S. military action against Iran in 2011 and 2012 was growing as Iran threatened to close the Persian Gulf to U.S. forces.

Tehran undertook no actions that would have led to a war that Iran would have inevitably lost. Instead, they blended public defiance and sometimes aggressive rhetoric with back-channel offers of indirect engagement via third parties themselves inclined towards diplomacy. Between 2003 and 2005, Tehran's representatives undertook lengthy negotiations with Europe in ultimately unsuccessful talks. From 2013 to 2015, Iran worked with the Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany (P5+1) to develop the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Lengthy and often indirect nuclear negotiations have become a mainstay of Iranian diplomatic practice, including during the Biden administration.

Tehran's approach not only prevented military strikes but discouraged coalitions, delayed the imposition of additional sanctions, and fostered an increasingly partisan debate among adversaries regarding the wisdom of engagement versus confrontation with Iran.

In cases where Iran did commit to significant nuclear concessions, the compromises were generally reversible.

- In 2003, Iran halted its secret nuclear weaponization program. In an apparent effort to maintain the nuclear weapons option, it retained some dual-use programs and an archive of critical weaponization material. Iran gradually increased the scale of its enrichment program and expanded nuclear facilities to include the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Facility.
- Following the conclusion of the JCPOA in 2015, Iran accepted significant, although in some cases finite, restrictions on its nuclear program in exchange for substantial and permanent sanctions relief. The deal did not require Iran to halt domestic enrichment, close facilities, or end its nuclear-related research programs. Critics argued that Iran preserved those portions of its nuclear program needed to retain the weaponization option and gained sanctions relief that sustained its domestic oppressive machinery as well as funded its missile and Quds Force programs. Iran soon argued that any actions related to Quds Force behavior would threaten hardliner support for the deal.

The core leadership of the Islamic Republic will struggle to deal with today's unprecedented domestic and foreign threats. History suggests that Tehran will aim to diffuse external pressures by repeating its past diplomatic strategy. A comprehensive approach to countering the Islamic Republic's malign activities must maintain consistent pressure on Iran's leaders to end proxy activities and dangerous nuclear expansion. The following steps will help achieve this.

- Ensure bipartisan support for aggressive diplomatic, financial, and military policies by ourselves and our partners against the Quds Force and Iranian proxy architecture to prevent them from regaining the initiative. This should include steps to counter regional media narratives that support proxy actors.
- Demonstrate the credibility of the U.S. military option. In addition to the ongoing U.S. military operations against Houthi leadership and infrastructure, the U.S. should announce that Quds Force personnel or facilities involved in Houthi military operations against U.S. war fighters will be at risk. Likewise, the U.S. should reiterate that Iran will face U.S. military action if it undertakes nuclear weaponization, the development of an intercontinental missile, or undertakes terrorist operations against Americans.
- Undertake robust enforcement of the Maximum Pressure sanctions campaign with an emphasis on Iran's oil shipping, oil purchasers, and financial networks. Initiate steps to trigger the "snapback" mechanism of the United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2231 to address Iran's expanded nuclear program.
- Avoid lengthy indirect talks. Stress that while the U.S. remains committed to a diplomatic solution with Iran over its nuclear program, the administration rejects the prospects of lengthy talks that leave Iran with reversible temporary nuclear constraints and sanctions relief that sustains regional aggression.

- Continue to invest in regional military, economic, and commercial partnerships. Regional economic and social success is as essential to our security interests as their military strength.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to your comments and questions.