

Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs

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Examining what a Nuclear Iran Deal Means for Global Security

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Madame Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the committee today. In the nearly 6 years since I have left government, I have continued in my public speeches to consistently include Iran and its nuclear program among the five things that “keep me awake at night”.

In fact, let me add that Iran was the problem with which I was least satisfied when I left government service in February, 2009. And it is the problem that has most consistently continued to worsen since that date.

We are now involved in nuclear negotiations with the Islamic Republic, no doubt the product of the tough sanctions created by the last two administrations. The real question, I believe, that is before us is what kind of nuclear agreement makes the situation better than it is today.

In fact, the bar is even higher. What kind of nuclear agreement will give us confidence that we will have the time, the certainty, and the will to prevent Iran becoming a nuclear weapons state at any time in the future?

I, of course, come at this problem from my professional perspective as an intelligence officer. And I will confine my comments to that aspect in this opening statement. Of course, I will welcome questions on broader topics from committee members later.

First, everyone must understand that Iran is a difficult intelligence target. During my time as director of CIA Iran was the second most discussed topic in the Oval Office, coming in behind only terrorism. President Bush used to ask me two kinds of questions about Iran. The first type would be obvious: what is the status of the Iranian nuclear program? The second type was simply to explain to him the decision-making processes inside the Islamic Republic. I always preferred the first type of question. The Iranian decision-making process is incredibly opaque and we should be under no illusions that we can precisely define the motivations or the future plans of the various power centers that vie for control in Teheran today. That gives me little confidence about any plans of action that are predicated on “helping the moderates” in that capital.

Second, our knowledge of the Iranian nuclear program is incomplete. That is why I believe that an important element of any agreement must be far more transparency than we have today about the past history of Iranian nuclear efforts. It is particularly disheartening when the IAEA is denied access to information or to installations they believe they need to see in order to gauge Iran's compliance with past agreements.

If the objective of these talks is to put distance between where the Iranians are and where they have to be to have a weapon, then we need a full accounting of the work they have done to date. Current American intelligence paints a picture inconsistent with Iranian claims, but no one on our side would say we yet have a complete picture of their work to date.

Third, even with incomplete knowledge, it is my assessment that at a minimum Iran is working very hard to keep its nuclear weapons option available. There is no other logical explanation for the investment in time, energy, commerce and national prestige that Iran has been willing to make.

I say this fully aware of the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate that judged that Iran had stopped at least a part of its program to develop a nuclear weapon. That assessment, I must add, was based upon evidence of absence, not absence of evidence. In other words, we did have good data that certain aspects of the program had been stopped. I judge that was far more a tactical than a strategic decision, however. And other aspects of the program continued forward with great energy. Here of course I am talking about Iranian work on creating fissile material and Iranian work in developing its ballistic missile force.

A fourth point. Iran is already too close to a nuclear weapon. The point of the negotiations from our point of view must be to roll back the Iranian program, not freeze it in place. That means that certain activities, certain stocks, and certain facilities must be dismantled. From all accounts, the Iranians have not yet been willing to be very forthcoming on this very important aspect. I would be very cautious about "creative solutions" that have been put forward in place of actual dismantlement of facilities and equipment and stockpiles.

An Iran that is parked too close to nuclear weapon's breakout will have a destabilizing effect on the region much like an Iran that has just tested a nuclear weapon. The Sunni neighbors will draw their conclusions and they will act accordingly. And, I believe, the committee understands how harmful that would be for the region and for us.

A fifth point that I believe should be made deals with verification. I had to deal with this question near the end of the Bush administration when we were negotiating with the North Koreans. At that time I pressed for invasive verification as a necessity for any agreement since I was unwilling to guarantee that American intelligence could sufficiently verify the agreement on its own. Let me repeat that position for the question before us today. Absent an invasive inspection regime, with freedom to visit all sites on short notice, American intelligence cannot provide adequate warning of Iranian nuclear developments.

I know that there are many other aspects of this issue that the committee will want to explore. I look forward to that important discussion.