

# Iran's Proliferation of Chaos

Prepared statement by

**Elliott Abrams**

*Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies  
Council on Foreign Relations*

Before the

Committee on Foreign Affairs - Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa,  
and Central Asia

*United States House of Representatives  
2nd Session, 118th Congress*

## Hearing on Israel and the Middle East at a Crossroads: How Tehran's Terror Campaign Threatens the U.S. and our Allies

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for your invitation to testify today on "Israel and the Middle East at a Crossroads: How Tehran's Terror Campaign Threatens the U.S. and our Allies."

A recent Brookings paper about the threat from Iran stated that:

"the Houthis are an independent part of an increasingly complex network that allows them to work directly with over a dozen other groups to share expertise, coordinate activities, and even collaborate on joint attacks. This web enables a proliferation of chaos far beyond what Iran could orchestrate by itself..."

The web being referred to includes Iran, Shia militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, Palestine Islamic Jihad and Hamas, and other groups, and that expression "proliferation of chaos" is apt.

Iran is indeed seeking to expand the chaos, most recently into Jordan. A July article by former Israeli deputy national security adviser Eran Lerman noted that "the Iranian regime has intensified its efforts to subvert the Hashemite monarchy" and Israel's foreign minister Israel Katz said in August that Tehran is seeking to set up a proxy terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank akin to those in the Gaza Strip, Yemen, and Iraq. To that end, he added that Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) operatives have been smuggling weapons into the West Bank through Syria and Jordan. The IRGC is "attempting to destabilize

the (Hashemite) regime and turn the Israel-Jordan border from a peaceful one into a volatile front,” Katz said.

Think of Iran’s role this way: what would the Middle East look like if Iran were not engaged in terrorism and aggression? Iraq would be achieving a peaceful and reasonably stable democracy. In Lebanon, Hezbollah would be a representative of many—not all—of Shia Lebanese, and the Lebanese people could reclaim the right to govern their own country. The possibilities of peace between Israelis and Palestinians would be far higher and the Gaza war would never have happened. Peace negotiations in Yemen would have a chance of success, and the Houthis would not be able to disrupt trade through the Bab el-Mandab, the Red Sea, and the Suez Canal.

Iran’s ability to disrupt peace and to help the countries most hostile to the United States does not end at the borders of the Middle East. Just this month the United States government informed allies of Iran’s shipment of hundreds of ballistic missiles to Russia for use in attacking Iran. A Wall Street Journal article on September 6 said this:

“Iran has sent short-range ballistic missiles to Russia, according to U.S. and European officials, a move that gives Moscow another potent military tool in its war against Ukraine and follows stern Western warnings not to provide those arms to Moscow....

A U.S. official confirmed the missiles “have finally been delivered.”

“We have been warning of the deepening security partnership between Russia and Iran since the outset of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and are alarmed by these reports,” said National Security Council Spokesman Sean Savett. “We and our partners have made clear both at the G-7 and at the NATO summits this summer that together we are prepared to deliver significant consequences. Any transfer of Iranian ballistic missiles to Russia would represent a dramatic escalation in Iran’s support for Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine.”

In March, Group of Seven leaders warned they would impose coordinated sanctions on Iran if it carries out the missile transfer.

The shipment involves a couple of hundred short-range ballistic missiles, according to Western officials.

These missile shipments are most significant for the Ukrainians they will kill, but they should be a clear message to us about the nature of the Iranian regime. Recently Iran elected a new president, Masoud Pezeshkian. Pezeshkian was called a “reformist” in stories in the Washington Post, CNBC, BBC, CNN, NPR, AP, Al Jazeera, and NBC—and I could go on. It is under this new “reformist” that these hundreds of ballistic missiles are being delivered. Either he is not at all a “reformist” or he is powerless when it comes to military and security matters—or both. So we can expect no reduction in Iran’s aggression, subversion, and support of terror.

And all these activities are being conducted by an Iran without nuclear weapons. What would they be doing if they had a nuclear umbrella and felt they could be even bolder?

Meanwhile, the Iranian nuclear weapons program continues to expand, and quickly. On September 9, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi reported to the IAEA Board that:

“Iran’s stockpile of uranium enriched up to 20% and up to 60% continues to increase, and that Iran has expanded the number of cascades it is using to enrich UF<sub>6</sub>. It has been more than three and a half years since Iran stopped implementing its nuclear-related commitments under the JCPOA, including provisionally applying its Additional Protocol and therefore it is also over three and a half years since the Agency was able to conduct complementary access in Iran. Consequently, the Agency has lost continuity of knowledge in relation to the production and inventory of centrifuges, rotors and bellows, heavy water and uranium ore concentrate.

“You also have before you my report on the NPT Safeguards Agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran. There has been no progress in resolving the outstanding safeguards issues. Iran says it has declared all nuclear material,

activities and locations required under its NPT Safeguards Agreement. However, this statement is inconsistent with the Agency’s findings....”

Mr. Chairman, I do not believe the United States and our allies have responded adequately to Iran’s actions.

To take one example, consider the Houthis’ impact on international trade and commerce. The U.S. Navy web site entitled “Who We Are” tells us this: “Since 1775, America’s Navy has maintained freedom of the seas. Not only for our nation, but for our allies and strategic partners.” The Navy’s “Mission Statement” says “The United States is a maritime nation, and the U.S. Navy protects America at sea. Alongside our allies and partners, we defend freedom, preserve economic prosperity, and keep the seas open and free.”

But we are not doing that. The Houthi attacks have led to a 79.6 percent drop in dry bulk carriers going through the Suez Canal in June 2024 versus June 2023. The Danish shipping company A.P Moller-Maersk announced on September 5 that traffic through the Suez Canal has decreased 66 percent since companies began diverting ships away from the Red Sea to avoid attacks launched by the Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

The U.S. response has been purely defensive, and it has failed. A recent article in the Telegraph newspaper in London by former Royal Navy Commander Tom Sharpe was entitled “The Houthis Have Defeated the U.S. Navy.” Sharpe wrote that “The Houthis were not deterred” by the defensive U.S. and allied naval actions, which failed. He continued:

Emboldened by these failures, the Houthis have ramped up their attacks:

Since January, not only have the attacks steadily increased in number, they have diversified too. Drones and cruise missiles were accompanied by hijackings and ballistic missiles.

Now, the Houthis are not producing advanced ballistic and cruise missiles. Those are Iranian missiles given to the Houthis. So this interference with

international shipping is a product of Iranian foreign policy—yet Iran has paid no price for it.

As to the sale of ballistic missiles to Russia, “significant consequences” were promised. Where are they? Most recently news stories have said Iran Air’s routes in Europe would be suspended, but is that all that will be done? No significant economic or financial sanctions? Iran Air does not fly to the United States, so we can’t suspend it; what will we do?

Will Iran pay a price? That is the question that must be asked about all of Iran's malign activities in the region and beyond it: Will Iran pay a price?

Iran has paid no significant price for its April attack on Israel, when it launched 300 projectiles and its proxies launcher about 200 more.

Iran has paid no significant price thus far for its defiance of the International Atomic Energy Agency and its build-up of a stockpile of enriched uranium that would allow it to build several nuclear weapons in just a matter of weeks. While U.S. oil sanctions remain on the books, they are not being enforced and Iran is selling more and more. In May Iran reached a 5-year export high of 1.7 million barrels per day. During the last three and a half years, Iran's oil revenue is estimated at \$100 billion, about \$40 billion more than it would have received had the sanctions been in effect as they were in 2019 and 2020. In addition to that revenue, the United States has allowed Iran to access \$16 billion in what had previously been frozen funds. All of which gives Iran the money it needs to continue these policies of aggression, subversion, and support for terror.

Mr. Chairman, I do not think all of this should lead us to wring our hands. It should lead us to act.

If the United States allows Iran to continue building its nuclear weapons program, building its proxy terror network, and blocking the sea lines of communication, and Iran pays no penalty for these activities, we can see what will happen. There will be more of the same. Jordan will face more subversion, Israel will face more violence in the West Bank, Hezbollah's threat to Israel will increase, the Houthis will attack U.S. naval vessels and international trade more often and more successfully. And eventually—in a few months or a couple of years, Iran will have a nuclear weapon. That's a formula for violence and war, and for a Middle East largely under Iran's thumb.

But we can prevent this. Iran's leaders are evil but they are rational. They respond to actions that threaten their interests, and they respect American power. So what needs to be done?

First, both candidates for president should repeat what President Biden and his immediate predecessors have pledged: that Iran will not be permitted to get a nuclear weapon. In the Jerusalem U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration of July 14, 2022, President Biden pledged this:

“Consistent with the longstanding security relationship between the United States and Israel and the unshakeable U.S. commitment to Israel's security, and especially to the maintenance of its qualitative military edge, the United States reiterates its steadfast commitment to preserve and strengthen Israel's capability to deter its enemies and to defend itself by itself against any threat or combination of threats....

“The United States stresses that integral to this pledge is the commitment never to allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon, and that it is prepared to use all elements of its national power to ensure that outcome.”

Both candidates should endorse that language as soon as possible, as should the next Congress.

Second, it has been reported widely that both CENTCOM and the US Navy believe our ships are sitting ducks for the Houthis and are dissatisfied with the way the United States has allowed Iran to close international waterways and threaten us. The Wall Street Journal reported that CENTCOM commander Eric Kurilla wrote in a classified letter that “US service members will die if we continue going this way”, and he argued for a more forceful response to Houthi attacks.

We need that more forceful response. We need to make it clear to Iran that if an American ship is hit, the U.S. retaliation will hit Iran, not its expendable proxies.

Third, that same message should be sent with respect to Iranian Shia militia proxy attacks on American troops in Iraq and Syria. Iran respects American power, and we have seen this repeatedly when that power is used—from President Reagan’s sinking of half the Iranian Navy in 1988, to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, to the killing of Suleimani in January 2020. We saw it in the Fall of 2020 when the United States made it clear to Iran that if American troops were killed by Shia militias our response would target Iran, and those attacks declined by about 90 percent at the end of the Trump administration.

Iran fears American power. Its leaders are, as I said, evil but rational. They fear escalation and they fear confrontation with the United States. But we have too often been guided by fear of Iran, and have restrained the ability of both our own CENTCOM forces and of our ally Israel in responding to Iranian attacks. It’s past time to put those fears behind us and reassert America’s ability and willingness to ensure that Iran cannot build a nuclear weapon, cannot close international waterways, cannot attack our troops in the Middle East, and cannot assault and subvert our allies. We have the power; the question is whether we have the will and the commitment.

Finally, it’s important to remember that Iranians have not chosen the regime that rules them and creates chaos in the Middle East. The Iranian people loathe the regime and repeatedly risk their lives to rise up against it. The ultimate solution to the problem of Iran is democracy, because when the Iranian people are free to govern themselves Iran will have a very different foreign policy. Consequently, we should do what we reasonably can to help them express their views and bring this evil regime to an end. This means, among other things, taking a close look at our public diplomacy, our broadcasting, and other ways in which we can assist the Iranian people in their struggle for freedom.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee.