

Opening Statement of the Honorable Ted Poe (R-TX), Chairman
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade Hearing:
“Iranian Backed Militias: Destabilizing the Middle East”
October 4, 2017

(As prepared for delivery)

The Middle East continues to pose some of the greatest challenges to U.S. national security. Where there is our threat to our interests in the region – we can be sure that Iran’s proxy forces and militias are not far behind. From Yemen to Afghanistan, Iranian arms can be found in the hands of some of the most dangerous actors.

This is part of a calculated strategy by the mullahs in Tehran to assert control over the region by expelling the United States and subjugating our allies. The Iranians believe they are entitled to dominance over the Mideast. They provide weapons and support to sectarian thugs who commit atrocities and undermine government institutions. In Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, and the Palestinian territories, Iran backs violent actors who either rule through brutality or aspire to seize power by eliminating political opposition.

Many of these groups have been household names for years. Hezbollah in Lebanon is the most prominent. Nurtured by Tehran since the 1980s, Hezbollah has grown from a band of insurgents who perpetrated the 1983 Beirut Marine Corps barracks bombing to a well-armed and funded terrorist state-within-a-state that does Iran’s bidding around the globe. Its clever use propaganda, civil service, political participation, and militancy has made Hezbollah a dominant force in Lebanon. Its power in the country undermines the U.S. relationship with Beirut and poses a significant threat to our friends in Israel.

Increasing we see Hezbollah operatives going beyond Lebanon and carrying out the will of its Iranian masters elsewhere. From training Houthi rebels in Yemen to directly contributing to the slaughter in Syria and preserving Bashar al-Assad’s oppressive regime. But now Iran has multiple “Hezbollahs” it can call on to kill and coerce throughout the region. Funded by sanctions relief granted to Iran under the JCPOA and enabled by America’s retreat over the past 8 years, Iranian-backed groups are seizing territory, cajoling governments, and hindering our effort to defeat ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Our brave troops, foreign service officers, and intelligence personnel who are trying to help Iraqis, Syrians, and Kurds fight ISIS have been repeatedly threatened by Iran’s many thugs in Iraq and Syria. In May, U.S. airstrikes stopped an Iranian-backed militia that was advancing towards our troops in Syria. A month later U.S. aircraft shot-down two Iranian-made drones that tried to attack coalition forces. Iran and its proxies are also working hard to sow division with our partners by waging a propaganda campaign that claims the U.S. supports ISIS and that Iranian militias brought victory in places like Mosul. This is of course a lie.

It is important to remember why bloodshed in this part of the world continues to endure. It was Tehran’s sectarian influence that poisoned the fledgling democracy in Iraq and propped-up the Assad regime in Syria. Because of this, Sunni extremist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS—that the U.S. had defeated—are able to recruit among alienated communities and thrive.

In the chaos, Iran moves in further. While we provide security assistance to governments to restore order, they forge new outlaw groups modeled after Hezbollah. Iran’s strategy is partly due to the weakness of its outdated military. In Syria, Iran has turned to recruiting from vulnerable communities to

fight its war. A report this week from Human Rights Watch shows that Iran is recruiting child soldiers from Afghanistan to help save the Assad regime. But using foreign forces, Iran creates a grey zone where it can challenge rivals but deny its involvement. Using Hezbollah in Lebanon it can wage war on Israel while never suffering retaliation. In Yemen, its Houthi allies can fire missiles at U.S. warships and our Gulf partners with impunity.

Tehran's ability to expand its power throughout the region and become a threat to us and our allies has gone on for far too long. I applaud the recent legislation that cleared the Foreign Affairs Committee that targets Hezbollah. But more must be done. Opposition to dangerous Iranian expansionism and support for terrorism is a bipartisan concern. Congress can lead further by developing a strategy to counter all of Iran's proxies.

There is more at stake than just surrendering the region to Iran. If we want to truly defeat ISIS and defend allies like Israel, we must stop the growth of Iranian-backed groups and their destabilizing behavior. Iran and its thugs are not ten feet tall. They are armed mobs that have gone unchallenged. To turn this tide, America must be engaged and stand with its partners in the Middle East. And that's just the way it is.