

**Testimony before the House Committee on Oversight and
Government Reform
Subcommittee on National Security**

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‘Assessing the Iran Deal’

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Chairman DeSantis, Ranking Member Lynch and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss one of the most pressing national security challenges facing America and its closest allies today: the threat posed by the ever-expanding territorial and ideological ambitions of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

I am Lieutenant General Michael D. Barbero (retired). I served as an Infantry Officer and General Officer for 38 years. I have commanded at every level from Lieutenant Colonel to Lieutenant General. I served a total of 46 months in Iraq over three combat tours. In my last tour of duty in Iraq, from 2009 to January 2011, I was responsible for the training, equipping and development of all Iraqi security forces, while serving simultaneously as the Commander of Multi-National Security and Transition Command–Iraq and the Commander of the NATO Training Mission–Iraq. Most recently, I was the Director of the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization, responsible for leading the Defense Department’s actions to rapidly provide counter-IED capabilities in support of combatant commanders, military services and other federal agencies to enable the defeat of the IED as a weapon of strategic influence.

As a soldier and commander in Iraq I have witnessed Iran’s hegemonic ambitions and direct targeting of American troops. In the three years since my retirement from the Army, I have made more than 30 trips to the region, meeting with many senior government and business leaders. I have seen, first hand, the spreading domination of the Iranian regime from Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea. Just two weeks ago, I was part of a group of international senior retired military officials who traveled to Israel. We were there to review the situation on the ground, assess the threat of Hezbollah, and meet with national security leaders, including Prime Minister Netanyahu.

I am proud to be here today as a member of the Advisory Board of United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI), a not-for-profit, non-partisan, advocacy group that seeks to heighten awareness of the danger the Iranian regime poses to the international community. UANI’s private sanctions campaigns and state and federal legislative initiatives focus on ending the economic and financial support of the Iranian regime by corporations, individuals and other entities until Iran abandons its nuclear weapons program, support for terrorism and gross human rights violations.

On September 27, 2014, Ali Riza Zakani, a member of Iran’s parliament and a close confidante of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, stated that Iran is at a phase of “Grand Jihad” and “Three Arab capitals (Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad) have already fallen into Iran’s hands and belong to the Iranian Revolution.” That’s not to mention Yemen, where Iran continues to support the Houthis in their quest for control of the country.

In the short time I have today, I would like to focus on how Iran is directing its proxies in Lebanon and Iraq, taking full advantage of the world’s concern with ISIS and the civil war in Syria to successfully pursue its strategy of regional hegemony and carving what it hopes will be a permanent zone of control that surrounds Israel with hostile forces. The actions of Iran and its proxies in Iraq and Lebanon present the most imminent challenge to United States interests in the region.

Iran in Lebanon

Iran's money helped create the terrorist organization Hezbollah in Lebanon in the early 1980s and today directly funds the group with an estimated \$800 million annually.

In a speech broadcast on June 25, 2016 Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said: "We are open about the fact that Hezbollah's budget, its income, its expenses, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, come from the Islamic Republic of Iran. As long as Iran has money, we have money... Just as we receive the rockets that we use to threaten Israel, we are receiving our money. No law will prevent us from receiving it..."

Until September 11, 2001, Hezbollah was responsible for killing more Americans than any other terrorist organization. Among other deadly attacks, Hezbollah has been linked to the 1983 attack on U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon; the 1992 suicide bombing at the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina; the 1994 suicide bombing of the Argentine Jewish Mutual Association in Buenos Aires; and the 2012 bombing of an Israeli tourist bus in Bulgaria. Hezbollah is also suspected of involvement in the February 2005 Beirut suicide bombing that killed 23 people, including former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Iran provides critical military support to Hezbollah in Lebanon—support which has only grown over time—in the form of armaments and training. In 2006, when hostilities last broke out between Hezbollah and Israel, Hezbollah had approximately 13,000 short and medium-range rockets which could directly threaten northern Israel. Since then, however, Hezbollah's weaponry, training and experience have increased as it defends the Assad regime in Syria. According to Israeli estimates, as of 2015, Hezbollah now has an expanded arsenal of over 100,000 rockets and missiles, including long-range systems which are capable of threatening Israeli cities and ports and paralyzing the economy. These 100,000 rockets and missiles are more precise, with greater lethality and range, greatly exacerbating this threat to Israel's population and critical infrastructure.

In a February speech, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah issued a threat to Israel's nuclear reactor at Dimona and to a large fertilizer plant.

"I urge the enemy [Israel] to shut its ammonia tank in Haifa and dismantle its Dimona nuclear reactor [in the Negev Desert]," Nasrallah said in a televised speech. "The enemy knows what will happen if our rockets strike this reactor," he added.

Complicating Hezbollah's status, the terror group has fully integrated itself into Lebanon's political, military and social institutions. Hezbollah holds 12 seats in the Lebanese Parliament and 17 of the 30 Ministers in the Lebanese Government are from Hezbollah or allied parties. Hezbollah orchestrated the political agreement that underpins the current government and was largely responsible for the current president, Michel Aoun, taking office.

We are also seeing the increasing influence of Hezbollah over the Lebanese Armed Forces and the institutionalization of Hezbollah into Lebanon's security apparatus. In addition to the very serious threat posed by its rockets and missiles, it is estimated that Hezbollah's tactical military

capability has grown to between 20,000 to 25,000 fighters and 2500 artillery and mortar systems. Hezbollah is a hybrid military power that is stronger than many conventional armies.

In operations in Syria to protect the Assad regime, Hezbollah has gained valuable operational experience and conventional abilities such as employing airpower, operating with armored forces and seizing and holding terrain. In Israel, it is universally accepted by the officials with whom I met that once the threat to the stability of the Assad regime is defeated in Syria, Hezbollah will redeploy to southern Lebanon and a “Third Lebanon War” between Israel and Hezbollah will be inevitable.

Iraq

The good news in Iraq is that ISIS is being driven from Mosul. The bad news comes the day after Mosul, when Iraq could sink into endless sectarian strife, fueled by Iran’s support for brutal Shiite militias and the inability of Iraq’s government to control them. Collectively known as Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), these groups have deep ideological and financial ties to Iran and a long history of human rights abuses against Sunni and minority populations. Given their history of sectarian violence, these groups and their leaders will be an enduring challenge in any post-ISIS Iraq.

The Badr Organization is Iran’s oldest proxy in Iraq and even fought alongside Iranians during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. From 2004 to 2006, the group’s leader, Hadi al-Amiri, is accused of ordering attacks on up to 2,000 Sunni Iraqis. Since 2014, the group has also been documented carrying out summary executions of Sunnis and widespread burning and demolishing of homes. One Human Rights Watch employee in 2015 said that out of all the militias fighting ISIS, “we’ve documented the most abuses... definitely [by the] Badr Organization.”

Despite a long history of sectarian violence, Hadi al-Amiri—with deep ties to Iranian Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani—has wielded tremendous influence in Iraq, having served a number of high level officials and in behind-the-scenes roles in the Iraqi government.

Kata’ib Hezbollah is a U.S.-sanctioned Iraqi terrorist organization formed in 2006. During the U.S. war in Iraq, Kata’ib Hezbollah earned a reputation for planting deadly roadside bombs and using improvised rocket-assisted mortars to attack U.S. and coalition forces. Its leader, Jamal Jaafar Ibrahim—also known by his alias Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes—is the alleged mastermind behind the U.S. and French embassy bombings in Kuwait in 1983 and the 1985 assassination attempt on Kuwait’s emir. After the battle to recapture Tikrit in 2015, Kata’ib Hezbollah was accused, alongside Badr and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, of carrying out summary executions of Sunnis and “indiscriminate attacks in civilian areas,” according to a report by Human Rights Watch.

Formed in 2006 during the U.S. war in Iraq, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (“League of the Righteous”) carried out more than 6,000 bombing and kidnapping attacks targeting U.S. soldiers. In recent years, monitoring groups have documented numerous sectarian and homophobic attacks carried out by AAH, including the massacre of dozens of Sunni men in Iraqi towns.

These and other Iranian proxies fighting in Iraq are fully loyal to the Iranian regime and its supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. While operating under the guise of “Popular

Mobilization Units” committed to defeating ISIS, these proxy Shiite militias are commanded by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, have evolved into a permanent force in Iraq and will play a critical role in Iran’s strategy for regional control. The Iranian resourcing and control of the Shia militias in Iraq is repetition of a well-established strategy of arming, funding and training of similar groups. Following the Hezbollah model, these forces are part of Iran’s strategy to spread Iranian domination, extend Shia influence and exert dominant political control. As a result, they have grown to become, arguably, the most powerful military force in Iraq, and based on their true allegiance, these forces are ready to play any military role the Iranian leadership assigns to them.

In a post-ISIS Iraq, these Iranian-proxy forces represent the greatest threat to stability and security in Iraq. The sectarian actions of the Iranian-backed Shia militias are establishing the de facto partition of Iraq along sectarian lines. The brutal treatment of Sunnis and other minorities by these militias has served to deepen sectarian divisions and increased Sunni alienation from the Baghdad government, thereby damaging prospects for post-ISIS political reconciliation in Iraq. Kurdish Peshmerga and these Shia militias have already clashed, and Kurdish leaders have said that, following the defeat of ISIS, their “next fight” will be with the Iranian-controlled militias. These fully resourced proxy forces will continue their well-documented, brutal sectarian actions and will serve in the vanguard of the “Hezbollahization” of Iraq.

Whether it is propping up the Assad regime or directing Shiite militias in Iraq, the point man for Tehran’s ambitions remains Major General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran’s Quds Force, the external wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

As head of the Quds Force, Soleimani reports directly to the Iranian Supreme Leader. The U.S. government, the United Nations and the European Union have all sanction-designated Soleimani for involvement in either Iran’s nuclear program or the Syrian civil war, yet he traveled at least three times to Russia and other places with impunity. U.S. Central Command documents declassified in 2015 reveal that Iraqi Shiite militants under Soleimani’s command killed more than 500 U.S. service members in Iraq between 2005 and 2011 and that Soleimani also reportedly influenced then-Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to insist on the 2011 U.S. withdrawal.

Soleimani reportedly oversees approximately 100,000 Iraqi Shiite fighters and six Iranian training camps, according to August 2016 U.S. military estimates. In Syria, Soleimani directs Iran’s military support for Syrian Dictator Bashar al-Assad. One Free Syrian Army commander told the *Wall Street Journal* in 2013 that Soleimani was “running Syria. [President] Bashar [al-Assad] is just his mayor.”

What to do?

In Lebanon, the United States must work with its European allies in cutting off the financial pipeline that makes Hezbollah such a powerful actor. While the U.S. State Department has designated Hezbollah as a foreign terrorist entity, the European Union has not done so. It has only sanctioned its military wing, which is indistinguishable from its political operation. Through the years, Europe has been a significant destination for Hezbollah fundraising. The recent arrest of Kassim Tajideen, a dual Lebanese-Belgian citizen, who was charged with

conspiracy, fraud, and money laundering, is a recent example. Also, in February, Hezbollah members were detained after funneling millions of dollars from the sale of cocaine in the United States and Europe to purchase arms in Syria. Europe needs to do better, and following the lead of the United States would be a good start.

Secondly, the United States must work with its Lebanese counterparts to better ensure against the misuse of U.S.-supplied arms. Lebanon was the fifth largest recipient of American military assistance in 2016. Nevertheless, reports surfaced last year of Hezbollah parading American-made M113 armored personnel carriers in Syria. And more broadly, as recently as February 2017, Hezbollah has claimed the Lebanese army supports its actions against Israel.

There are allies to be found in the Lebanese political establishment to prevent Hezbollah from profiting off of U.S. assistance—just last week, as Arab leaders gathered for the 28th Arab League Summit in Amman, five former Lebanese presidents and prime ministers sent a letter to King Abdullah of Jordan requesting that “the Arabs show solidarity with Lebanon [in] “the rejection of illegal arms [i.e. Hizbullah arms].” With the current makeup of the Lebanese government—particularly with Hezbollah-supported Michel Aoun as president—Congress and the Trump administration should undertake a full review of the relationship between the Lebanese army and Hezbollah, and to guarantee that the army is sufficiently empowered and independent from any malign influence.

In Iraq, much of the attention over the last few months has been on clearing ISIS from Mosul. While there has been much tactical progress, there has not been the requisite focus on what happens the day after ISIS is pushed out of Iraq’s second-largest city. The U.S. must remain engaged in Iraq after the defeat of ISIS and we must not repeat the strategic error of withdrawing as we did in 2011. Many leaders in Iraq have voiced their strong desire for continued American engagement to assist the legitimate leaders and the Government of Iraq to protect Iraq’s sovereignty. We must work with the Government of Iraq to improve representative governance and support the Iraq Government’s efforts to check the power of Shiite militias while empowering Sunnis, Kurds and others within Iraq’s federal structure.

Conclusion

More than a year after signing a deal to postpone its ability to acquire nuclear weapons, Iran has moved aggressively against its neighbors, America, and its allies. As its actions in Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon and Yemen clearly demonstrate, Iran’s desire is to dominate, rather than be a positive force in the Middle East. The most aggressive and most effectively subversive forces in the region remain those controlled and resourced by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Unfortunately, with the lifting of sanctions that accompanies the signing of the Iran nuclear deal, Tehran’s resourcing of its proxy forces has continued unrestricted. Iran is the greatest threat to stability in the Middle East and the greatest threat to American interests in the Middle East. And, as we have seen in its aggressive and subversive actions across the Middle East, Iran has, and will continue to pursue its strategic goals at the expense of regional stability, our interests and the security of our allies.