



**Testimony of Michael Makovsky, Ph.D.
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**House Committee on Oversight and Accountability
Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs
“A Dangerous Strategy: Examining the Biden Administration’s Failures on Iran”
September 13, 2023**

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, esteemed members of this Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on this important topic.

My name is Michael Makovsky, and since 2013 I have been the President and CEO of the Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA), a Washington, D.C.-based organization dedicated to advancing U.S. national security interests in the Middle East. Our most consistent policy focus has been how best for the United States to address Iran's nuclear and conventional threats to our interests.

I am grateful that the Committee has chosen to highlight the word "strategy" when assessing the Biden administration's Iran effort, because it is important first to step back and ask: what is President Biden's strategic aim toward Iran?

The administration hasn't articulated a strategic goal toward Iran. In its [National Security Strategy](#), the administration outlined a series of policies, such as it will "work with allies and partners to enhance their capabilities to deter and counter Iran's destabilizing activities...pursue diplomacy to ensure that Iran can never acquire a nuclear weapon, while remaining postured and prepared to use other means should diplomacy fail...respond when our people and interests are attacked...always stand with the Iranian people striving for the basic rights." Yet, the Biden administration has done none of these things, except pursue diplomacy endlessly, virtually as an end unto itself.

The administration's actions and non-actions suggest its true aims, which seems more tactical than strategic, are effectively acquiescence and delay. The administration accepts the regime's existence, works with it, enriches and strengthens it, mutes criticism of its awful human rights abuses, does mostly nothing when its proxies attack American troops abroad and citizens at home, and seeks to kick the can down the road on its nuclear program. Although it says it supports Israel's freedom of action, it discourages Israel from initiating a military campaign against Iranian nuclear facilities.

I believe this to be very counter-productive and even dangerous for U.S. national security. The Islamic Republic is rabidly anti-American and anti-Western, keen to destroy Israel and other regional American partners while evicting America from the Mideast, increasingly aligns and works closely with our adversaries Russia and China, and continues to develop nuclear weapons, which when placed on ballistic missiles it is also producing could eventually threaten the U.S. homeland.

In three days, we'll mark the one-year anniversary of the brutal killing of Mahsa Amini, the 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian woman, whose arrest and brutal killing for alleged

inadequate head-covering triggered a mass movement, “Woman, Life, Freedom,” and set off months of Iranian protests, to which the regime responded by killing hundreds and arresting, raping, and torturing thousands. The protesters seek not just political reforms but a new regime, which, if successful, would offer an enormous transformative strategic windfall for American interests and could lead us to reduce our force posture in the region. Yet, the Biden administration barely expressed support for the protesters. Biden and other senior officials issued some words here and there—such as one sentence in Biden’s [2022 speech](#) to the United Nations General Assembly, “we stand with the brave citizens and the brave women of Iran who right now are demonstrating to secure their basic rights” —but nothing substantive. Neither Biden nor Secretary of State Blinken delivered a speech or held a press conference over the past year dedicated to supporting the demonstrators, despite their frequent rhetoric in support of democracy and human rights.

Another obvious sign of acceptance and acquiescence by the Biden administration has been particularly their weak enforcement of oil export sanctions against Iran and willingness to waive others. The administration in July [granted Iraq waivers](#) that allow it to funnel \$2.76 billions of dollars to the Iranian regime for the purchase of natural gas and electricity. While such waivers to Iraq are common, this most recent waiver is more than five times greater than previous ones—such as the one the administration granted in March of this year that only allowed Iraq to transfer \$500 million to Iran.

The Biden administration is also further enriching the regime in Tehran by under-enforcing existing sanctions on Iran’s oil industry. In August, Iran marked its [highest oil export level](#) in at least five years, by some estimates exceeding 2 million barrels per day for the first time since July 2018, when sanctions were just being reimposed following President Trump’s withdrawal from the JCPOA. That is about 3-5 times higher than at their nadir in 2020. Reports suggest about half of those exports are [being sent to China](#), at prices significantly below market. With the Biden administration doing little to crack down on these burgeoning exports, Iran’s revenue has grown accordingly. It is now [expected to earn](#) \$46 billion from its oil exports in 2023, compared to just \$15 billion in 2020 (in nominal dollars).

All that oil revenue and unfrozen funds goes directly or indirectly to strengthen the regime’s domestic position, line the pockets of its corrupt officials, fund Hezbollah and other radical Islamic proxies that terrorize American soldiers, Israel, and other allies in the region, finance its nuclear program, and oppress its people.

Also, since Biden became president, [JINSA has tracked Iran](#) and its proxies attacking U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Syria over 80 times, [launching over 250](#) rockets, missiles, and drones, according to U.S. Central Command Commander, General Michael Kurrilla, at

bases hosting U.S. servicemembers. At least 8 American troops were injured, and an American contractor killed in those attacks. In response to this flurry of attacks, the United States has retaliated just 4 times, according to JINSA data. And often those U.S. responses were intentionally designed, according to a [Department of Defense statement](#), “proportionate and deliberate action intended to limit the risk of escalation and minimize casualties.” Only 2 of those 4 U.S. strikes, in fact, killed the Iranian-backed militants responsible for attacking U.S. troops. Not once, however, did the Biden administration seek to hold their masterminds in Iran responsible.

As a counter-example, during this same period of time Israel’s experience is almost an exact mirror image of the U.S. experience. [Israel has conducted](#) at least 110 strikes against Iranian forces and proxies in Syria since early 2021, but only been attacked from Syria 4 times, demonstrating the deterrent power of a strong, even preemptive, response to Iranian aggression. Indeed, sometimes the Iranian have attacked U.S. forces in retaliation for Israeli strikes because they fear Israeli retaliation and not American.

The lack of a U.S. response to Iranian attacks on its troops isn’t about pivoting to Asia or any other grand ideas or slogans, but simply an avoidance of confrontation. And everyone in the region and around the world, including China, draws clear lessons about the lack of U.S. resolve.

Closer to home, Iran has been actively plotting to abduct or kill American citizens on American soil—e.g., Masih Alinejad, Mike Pompeo, Gen. (ret.) Frank McKenzie—requiring significant protective security details. And yet the administration has not, to my knowledge, retaliated against Iran to exact a price for such outrageous behavior. So, the threats to American citizens continue.

I wonder how our porous southern border might be enabling Iran to smuggle human assets into American soil—or facilitate drug cartels Iran has worked with to do so—who could threaten Americans. On the southwest border, border security has stopped over 100 non-U.S. citizens on our terrorism watch list in FY2023, [versus 0](#) in FY2019. How many on that terror list got through that we’re not aware of?

Of course, the most dangerous threat from Iran is its expanding nuclear program, which could ultimately threaten not just American interests and allies in the Middle East and Europe but our very homeland. The administration officially has said at times it will prevent a nuclear Iran. A few months ago, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan declared, “we have made clear to Iran that it can never be permitted to obtain a nuclear weapon.” Not overly robust, but still an important assertion. Last year, President Biden, said in a statement that he has a “commitment never to allow Iran to acquire a nuclear

weapon,” and then echoing language from President Obama adding he is “prepared to use all elements of its national power to ensure that outcome.”

However, the reality is the Biden administration has accepted a nuclear Iran. They were intent for two years to reenter the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, formally called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, albeit initially on better terms. It was an agreement that even President Obama conceded would permit Iran nuclear weapons capability by year 2027 or 2030 at the latest.

After failing to get Iran to reenter the JCPOA, recent reports suggest the administration has possibly reached an “understanding” with Tehran whereby Iran would free 5 Americans wrongly imprisoned in Iran, and Washington would free 5 legally imprisoned Iranians, and unfreeze over \$6 billion of Iranian funds. Further, Washington accept Iranian enrichment to the level of 60%, a short step away from 90% of enrichment grade—far higher than that allowed under the JCPOA. It reportedly does not involve Iran eliminating any of its 60% enriched uranium, nor its ample supply of 20% enriched uranium. This does nothing to set back Iran’s breakout time, which is already measured in just a matter of days. Indeed, because Iran seems to be continuing to accumulate uranium enriched below 60%, the amount of fissile material it could produce in a month continues to grow as well. By some estimates, Iran could now produce 6 bombs’ worth of weapons grade uranium in a month. Also, the understanding, as reported, doesn’t require IAEA inspections, making the current Iranian situation even more dangerous. In other words, even if this understanding is true, it will do little to address the threat of Iran’s escalating nuclear program beyond, possibly, buying a little time.

I encourage the Committee to try to determine whether any such “understanding” exists. If so, then it’s clear the administration sought to avoid any formal agreement in order to evade requirements of the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015, or INARA, which requires submission of any deal to Congress for a 30-day review period “regardless of the form it takes” as long as it pertains to Iran’s nuclear program.

This reported understanding, even if it solely involves paying \$1.2 billion per American hostage with no nuclear terms, sends a clear signal to the Iranian people of American acceptance of the brutal Tehran regime that is oppressing them. It further signals the Tehran regime, and other adversaries, and allies, around the globe, of U.S. weakness—namely, that the U.S. prefers to buy off Iran over hostages instead of pressuring it and risking confrontation.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley raised serious questions when he told the House this year in a prepared statement, “the United States remains committed, as a matter of policy, that Iran will not have a fielded, nuclear weapon.”

This shocking statement, with the term “fielded” suggesting accepting a nuclear Iran, did not attract much press attention but alarmed some Washington experts and our Israeli friends. General Milley did not walk back that statement but a few days later [spoke](#) to the House again, this time without using the term “fielded.” Still, the damage was done.

The fact is that before and after General Milley’s comments, absolutely no one in the Middle East—not the Israelis, Saudis, Emiratis, and certainly not the Iranians—believes Biden administration rhetoric about preventing a nuclear Iran. Some have called U.S. policy toward a nuclear Iran “containment.” However, that generously suggests an active effort to isolate Iran, and that too has been absent.

There needs to be a radical change in U.S. strategy and policy toward Iran. Instead of acceptance of the Tehran regime, our strategic aim should be regime collapse. Instead of nuclear acquiescence, we should pursue prevention. Instead of non-confrontation, we should create a credible military threat and pressure Iran on every front and roll back their regional gains. And we should strengthen our regional allies, especially Israel, the only country with the will to confront and roll back Iran and prevent it from becoming nuclear. All this would advance our strategic interests in the Middle East and across the globe.

I have [argued](#) for several years now that the long-term strategic aim of the United States toward Iran should be “regime collapse.” That means applying as much pressure on the Islamic Republic from every direction—without additional U.S. boots on the ground—to help heighten its internal pressures and domestic opposition so that the Iranian people finally overthrows the regime and creates a new Iranian republic that is more liberal and doesn’t threaten Israel and the United States. I remain optimistic that someday that will happen.

Regime collapse is not an historically radical strategy. In fact, it was one of the goals of the containment strategy George Kennan devised for the Cold War. As he wrote, the United States could “increase enormously the strains under which Soviet policy must operate, to force upon the Kremlin a far greater degree of moderation and circumspection than it has had to observe in recent years, and in this way to promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the breakup or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power.”

A strategy of regime collapse has the virtue of relying on forces already at work. Kennan and his successors articulated their strategy when Soviet power was rising and the Soviet leadership was secure internally. By contrast, the Islamic Republic today is

vulnerable, with ebbing, if not imploding, domestic legitimacy, even though its security forces are still prepared to kill and imprison those who oppose it.

One critical element of a regime collapse strategy is to do nothing to strengthen the Tehran regime. That means conducting no nuclear negotiations with Tehran unless the regime is willing to completely dismantle its nuclear facilities as Libya did a decade ago. Of course, the Libyan, and Ukraine, example suggest it would be suicide for the Tehran regime to do that, unless, perhaps, it believed such nuclear disarmament would fend off the regime's very collapse. Diplomatic talks are often a vital component of foreign policy, but nuclear talks with Iran have usually involved sanctions relief, which only provide the regime an economic lifeline and money to be used for nefarious purposes.

On the contrary, a second element of this strategy would be to restore the punishing economic sanctions that the Trump administration imposed. Preferably, the U.S. would get its European allies to invoke the "snapback" procedure that would permanently return all the UN sanctions that were in place prior to JCPOA but, due to the deal, are now expiring over the coming few years. This would reduce the funds available to the regime to buy domestic support—among purposes inimical to U.S. interests.

A third element of a regime collapse strategy must be a "rollback" policy designed to weaken Iran's power projection capabilities and evict its existing forces and proxies from critical points around the region. This would raise the costs of the Tehran regime's external activities and accelerate its decline and demise. Indeed, one rallying cry of demonstrators has been criticism of the regime's foreign expenditures at the expense of the domestic needs of Iranian people.

Rollback was an early Cold War concept, proposed by the Eisenhower administration but employed by Ronald Reagan in what became known as the Reagan Doctrine. Reagan favored an offensive strategy to undermine the Soviet Union, including by supporting indigenous anti-communist insurgencies.

Like the Soviet Union in the 1980s, Iran is also militarily overextended in multiple intractable conflicts, often in lands riven by ethno-sectarian fissures. The United States should exploit this by supporting or building up political or military forces in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen that oppose Iran's domination and/or seek greater self-determination or independence from Iran's clients. The United States could also interdict Iranian weapons supplies going through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon by land and air, and by sea to Yemen. It could also attack Iranian forces or proxies, and their camps, inside Iran and elsewhere in the region, that plot against or attack U.S. soldiers in the region and American citizens in the American homeland.

A fourth element is for the United States to wage a concerted political warfare campaign through information operations, cyber and support for political, sectarian, and ethnic dissidents, among other measures.

A fifth, and most important, element of a regime collapse strategy is to ensure at all costs, whether directly or through support of others, that Iran cannot achieve nuclear weapons capability.

Whether or not the United States pursues any or all of these direct measures, it should, as the sixth element of this strategy, most certainly strengthen its support for regional partners who are, or could be, committed to defending against and countering Iranian aggression and preventing Iran from become nuclear weapons-capable. Indeed, it is the most politically palatable, feasible and in some ways least risky, of all the elements.

Primarily, that means beefing up Israeli deterrence and military capabilities in its campaign to roll back Iran on the ground and prepare for a major multi-front war with Iran, Hezbollah, and other proxies, as part of an effort to prevent a nuclear Iran, which seems increasingly likely. Unlike the United States, Israel regularly attacks Iranian forces and its proxies on the ground in Syria and destroys Iranian arms depots and convoys bringing advanced weaponry to Hezbollah, as part of its mostly successful “campaign between the wars.” Israel also regularly interdicts Iranian weaponry headed toward Gaza. It further clandestinely sabotages Iranian nuclear facilities and kills Iranian nuclear scientists.

Some basic ways the U.S. could help Israel would be to preposition precision-guided munitions in the U.S. arms depot in Israel and expedite delivery to Israel of KC-46 aerial refueling tankers, to help Israel prepare for a defensive conflict to prevent a nuclear Iran. Israeli determination against Iran is an incredibly valuable tool for America to advance U.S. interests without using American troops and becomes even more valuable amid U.S. retrenchment from the region and growing focus on the Indo-Pacific.

U.S. support for Israel would be significantly enhanced if it concluded a mutual defense pact with the Jewish state, as JINSA first raised in 2019, when we also drafted a possible treaty. It would help prevent a nuclear Iran, a mitigate the severity of a conflict that could break out if Israel attacked Iranian nuclear facilities to preempt an Iranian nuclear breakout and would generally contribute to regional security as America increasingly has to deal with threats in Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

I commend the Biden administration’s now intense focus on trying to bring about Israel-Saudi normalization, which likely would involve some sort of U.S.-Saudi security treaty. While such a treaty, if the administration submits and the Senate approves it, might initially lead to some destabilization as Iran likely tests it, it would contribute to deterring Iran and greater regional stability.

Taken together, these six elements—not strengthening Iran, imposing punishing sanctions, pursuing rollback, weakening the regime politically, preventing it from attaining nuclear weapons capability, and boosting partners’ capabilities—comprise a coherent strategy for protecting U.S. interests and partners by pushing the Iranian regime to the point of collapse.

Despite the Tehran regime’s difficulties and vulnerabilities, the time between collapsing and collapse is unknowable; it can happen tomorrow or in 20 years. In the Soviet Union’s case, it was 40 years following Kennan’s diagnosis. Tehran’s security forces remain determined to arrest and kill its opponents, and it remains a very clever, ruthless, and relentless adversary. Indeed, if the U.S. did pivot and follow the strategy outlined here, we should be prepared for heightened Iranian testing and escalation on the ground and in its nuclear program.

In 1949, Winston Churchill presciently predicted the collapse of communist regimes:

“Tyrannies may restrain or regulate their worlds. The machinery of propaganda may pack their minds with falsehood and deny them truth for many generations of time. But the soul of man thus held in trance or frozen in a long night can be awakened by a spark coming from God knows where and in a moment the whole structure of lies and oppression is on trial for its life. Peoples in bondage need never despair.”

It is incumbent upon the United States to hasten the coming of that spark in Iran, so that that evil regime collapses, as Soviet rule did, and as all evil regimes eventually do.

However, for that to happen, the United States first needs to adopt, then articulate, and then implement a systematic strategy to protect vital U.S. interests. Congress has an important oversight role to play in ensuring that the Executive Branch develops and pursues such a strategy. Today’s hearing is a critical first step in that process.

Thanks again for your time, and I look forward to answering your questions.

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