

Statement of GEN USAF (ret.) Charles F. Wald
Co-Chair, JINSA-commissioned Iran Strategy Council

Hearing on the Implications of a Nuclear Agreement with Iran (Part IV)
United States House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building
September 9, 2015

Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Engel, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and discuss how the strategic environment in which the U.S. military operates will change, over both the near- and long-term, under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). My decades of service as a pilot and as an air commander in the U.S. Air Force, including commanding operations in Bosnia and Afghanistan, have made me familiar with U.S. allies and adversaries in the Middle East as well as the capabilities the U.S. military uses to protect the one, and deter and defeat the other. I co-chair the new Iran Strategy Council, of which Vice Admiral Bird is also a member, an organization of former senior U.S. military officials commissioned by JINSA's Gemunder Center for Defense and Strategy. Its mission is to help U.S. policymakers analyze and respond to the Iran deal's potentially grave repercussions.

We released a [report](#) last week assessing that while the JCPOA will strengthen Iran and its proxies, it will also reduce U.S. credibility and alienate it from its Middle Eastern allies at a time that U.S. military capability is already being reduced by sequestration.¹ This agreement will not prevent a nuclear Iran, but rather allow it to become a nuclear threshold state when its major restrictions lapse in no more than 15 years. This agreement also will enable Iran to become more powerful and expand its influence and destabilizing activities – across the Middle East and possibly directly threatening the U.S. homeland. In other words, the JCPOA does not reduce the need for a robust U.S. military presence in the Middle East, nor does it preclude the possibility of a military confrontation with Iran. Instead, it creates a much more difficult strategic environment for the United States to operate in over the next 15 years as Iran becomes economically stronger, regionally more powerful and militarily more capable. Simply put, the United States is in a far better position to prevent a nuclear Iran today, even by military means if necessary, than when the JCPOA expires.

JCPOA Consequences for U.S. Strategic Posture

¹ Gemunder Center Iran Strategy Council, "Assessment of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action: Strategic Consequences for U.S. National Security," September 2, 2015.

President Obama has made clear that the JCPOA does not preclude the need to maintain a robust military deterrent against Iran.

The president has acknowledged, and nuclear experts have confirmed, that as the agreement's major nuclear restrictions lapse by year 15, Iran will "have advanced centrifuges that enrich uranium fairly rapidly, and at that point the breakout times would have shrunk almost down to zero." At that point, should the regime in Tehran decide to sprint for a nuclear weapons capability, U.S. options for preventing a nuclear Iran will be extremely limited. This is why President Obama has also cautioned, "if 15 or 20 years from now, Iran tries to build a bomb, this deal ensures that the United States will have ... the same options available to stop a weapons program as we have today, including – if necessary – military options."²

This is perhaps the most important element of the deal to understand: it does not remove the need to maintain a long-term credible military option against Iran's nuclear program to continue meeting the fundamental policy objective of preventing a nuclear Iran. Moreover, because the JCPOA grants Iran access to resources and technology with which to modernize its armed forces and continue its pursuit of hegemonic and destabilizing activities in the Middle East, the deal increases the need for the United States to project power in the region so as to protect its interests and allies from potential Iranian interference. But if continued or increased U.S. military presence in the Middle East will be required, what will the strategic environment that we will be operating in look like under the JCPOA?

I believe two main dynamics will shape the ability of the United States military to project power and operate in the Middle East. First, the decline in U.S. military capabilities – end strength, force structure, readiness and modernization – that is already happening and will only get worse if sequestration, the decade of cuts to the defense budget, are allowed to continue for the remaining six years. Second, the erosion of U.S. credibility in the eyes of our Middle Eastern allies as a result of our accepting a deal that they view as fundamentally dangerous. Combined, these dynamics mean that the United States might still have the military option when the JCPOA expires, but it will face a far more dangerous and difficult option than it would today. This deal creates a strategic environment in which Iran can pursue nuclear weapons capability at a much lower level of risk.

U.S. Capability

The United States military is and remains the most capable fighting force in the world. However, it is severely overtaxed on a global level and under-resourced going forward. That is unlikely to change anytime soon. In absolute terms, the U.S. armed forces are vastly superior to those of Iran and will remain so 15 years from now. But the relative capabilities between the two militaries is already shrinking, and will only decline further over the JCPOA's term.

² "Full text: Obama gives a speech about the Iran nuclear deal," *Washington Post*, August 5, 2015.

Taken purely from a budget perspective, Iran’s defense spending will almost certainly increase over the next decade due to significant influx of resources generated by the lifting of sanctions. However, U.S. military spending has seen sharp cuts during the last three years and is slated to suffer additional reductions. In 2011, Congress enacted close to \$500 billion in cuts to defense spending over the succeeding ten years. It also set in place a process, known as sequestration, which forced another almost \$500 billion in reductions. In sum, by 2021 the Department of Defense will have received nearly \$1 trillion less than it projected was necessary to defend the country.

Sequestration, according to General Ray Odierno, the recently retired Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, “will challenge us to meet even our current level of commitments to our allies and partners around the world.... Ultimately, sequestration limits strategic flexibility and requires us to hope we are able to predict the future with great accuracy, something we have never been able to do.” General Dunford issued a similarly dire warning about the impact of these cuts: “The readiness of the Joint Force, the modernization of the Joint Force, will suffer what I would describe, and without exaggeration, as catastrophic consequences.”³

Seen from a capabilities perspective, sequestration will be even more damaging to the ability of the United States to project force in the Middle East. The capabilities that will be most important in confronting Iranian aggression and potentially preventing a nuclear Iran – long-range strike, standoff, forward staging and counter-A2/AD capabilities – are among those that will suffer the greatest decline. “The missions that have the highest risks,” Adm. Jonathan Greenert, the Chief of Naval Operations, told Congress, “are those missions requiring us to deter and defeat aggression, and the mission to project power despite an anti-access, area denial challenge.... In terms of warfighting, the sequestered Navy of 2020 would be left in a position where it could not execute those two missions I referred to.”⁴

In only the most visible demonstration of sequestration’s impact on the Navy, the aircraft carrier *USS Theodore Roosevelt* will depart the Persian Gulf this fall and will not be replaced for another several months, marking the first time in years that a carrier will not be in the region. As an Air Force combat pilot and air commander, I know full well the unique power projection capabilities and deterrent effect that an aircraft carrier battle group provides the United States. To deprive ourselves of such a vital tool in such a crucial region at such a pivotal moment in indefensible.

U.S. airpower faces similar challenges from sequestration. According to General Mark Welsh, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force, “when we deployed to Operation Desert Storm in 1990, the Air Force had 188 fighter squadrons. Today, we have 54, and we're headed to 49 in the next couple of years. In 1990, there were 511,000 active duty airmen alone. Today, we have 200,000

³ Amaani Lyle, “Sequestration Threatens Army Readiness,” *DoD News*, January 28, 2015; “Joint Chiefs of Staff Confirmation Hearing,” C-SPAN, July 9, 2015.

⁴ “Statement of Admiral Jonathan Greenert Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Impact of Sequestration on National Defense,” Chief of Naval Operations – U.S. Navy, January 28, 2015.

fewer than that. And as those numbers came down, the operational tempo went up.” Of those 54 squadrons, “just under 50 percent ... are fully combat ready,” and many of the aircraft in operation are decades old.⁵

These adverse effects have occurred over just three years of sequestration. With little apparent political appetite to reverse these cuts, there are likely to be six more years to come. As the total number of U.S. naval and air assets declines and the end strength of our ground troops is slashed, there will be fewer assets available for stationing in and deployment to the Middle East. Moreover, those assets that will be available to U.S. commanders will be older, less frequently serviced and operated by personnel with fewer training hours than today. Nor will there be resources available to invest in defensive measures, whether for our allies or our homeland, to protect against Iranian threats such as missile attacks, electromagnetic pulse (EMP) attacks or terrorism. At the same time, Iran will be ramping up its military expenditures and modernizing its capabilities.

In other words, during the course of the JCPOA, as Iran gains the resources and access to develop its military capabilities, those of the United States will be significantly reduced. As Iran bristles with more and newer arms, the United States will have fewer and older ones to counter them. Iranian influence in the region will increase in direct proportion to the perceived decline in American capability.

Should the worst happen – should Iran threaten the security of our allies, should it decide, after 15 years, to sprint for a nuclear weapons capability – the U.S. armed forces will rise to challenge, but they will do so with less manpower, fewer capabilities, more antiquated platforms and a lower level of readiness than they have now or have had in a very long time. Such action would also occur against the backdrop of a much more heavily militarized, and perhaps even nuclearized, Middle East, heightening the danger of miscalculation and spillover conflict.

U.S. Credibility

Credibility is the bedrock of deterrence. American credibility flows not only from the prowess of U.S. armed forces, but also from the perception, of both our allies and enemies, that those capabilities will be used to protect U.S. interests, counter aggression and defend allies anywhere in the world, at any time. If U.S. military strength or commitment to alliances is seen as weakened, our adversaries will feel emboldened and our partners will feel compelled to seek protection elsewhere.

With U.S. military capability visibly deteriorating under sequestration, our credibility is already coming under question. Therefore, it will be even more important for U.S. leaders to remain sensitive to the perception of U.S. commitment to its regional allies and determination to protect them, lest it erode any further.

⁵ David Alexander, “Stressed, shrinking Air Force needs more funding: U.S. officials,” Reuters, February 27, 2015.

Some lawmakers have argued that rejecting the JCPOA would weaken the deterrent value of the U.S. military option by alienating European allies. Perhaps, but our Middle Eastern partners appear much more concerned about what accepting the deal communicates about the value of U.S. security guarantees. Those perceptions, whether or not they are true, matter much more for the stability and peace of the region.

Preventing a nuclear Iran has been a priority U.S. national security objective for over a decade. It has been paired with, and integral to, a more comprehensive regional strategy, one that has prioritized defeating terrorist threats and guaranteeing the security of U.S. allies. Some U.S. allies have made clear they believe this deal will not prevent a nuclear Iran and, that by proceeding with the JCPOA, the United States is disrupting the regional balance of power and endangering them. As described above, other regional partners have noted that the deal empowers Iran to redouble its destabilizing regional activities, making the Middle East a more dangerous place. There is anger – even a sense of betrayal – among U.S. allies in the region.

Regardless of their accuracy, these perceptions that the JCPOA entails a reversal of U.S. commitments to protect our allies are dangerous for several reasons. First, if allowed to persist, they will drive these partners to seek security by other means. This could mean taking matters into their own hands, as Israel previously has done or Saudi Arabia decided to do earlier this year by unilaterally launching an air campaign against Iranian-backed rebels in Yemen. Such actions, if not backed by the overwhelming force of the U.S. military, could spark reprisals that spiral into wider regional conflict. Alternatively, our regional allies might seek other guarantors of their security. Whether this means accepting Iranian hegemony or allying with other powers – such as Russia or China – the result would be detrimental to U.S. influence and interests in the region.

Second, U.S. ability to project power in the Middle East depends, at least in part, on the cooperation and support of these allies. Basing and overflight rights are critical to maintaining and deploying a deterrent force. The perception that we are no longer committed to our allies' security could risk the revocation of those rights and spark a vicious cycle of destabilization. If a country feels that U.S. forces based in its territory will not be used to defend its interests and security, why allow the forces to be there at all? If U.S. forces lose their access to bases, airspace and territory, making it harder to operate in the region, their ability to defend those same partners will be compromised.

Our Middle Eastern allies have made perfectly clear what the JCPOA means to them: the weakening of U.S. security guarantees and reversal of decades of U.S. regional security policy. The mere fact that such perceptions persist, regardless of their veracity, undermines U.S. credibility, threatening to turn them into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Challenges for the United States

Maintaining our position in the Middle East to prevent a nuclear Iran will demand increasing resources, posture and attention, far more than is necessary today. We must therefore must face the realities of the agreement with immediate action along several key lines of effort.

First, we must strengthen fraying ties with regional allies through sustained multilateral engagement to assemble a regional coalition to hold the line against Tehran. This demands greater cooperation with U.S. partners in the region in the realms of missile defense, intelligence, air and maritime security.

And we must preserve our country's military edge against Iran with recapitalization, investment and modernization of our forces. At a minimum this would mean returning the defense budget to baseline levels requested by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in 2012, and as recommended by the bipartisan National Defense Panel last year.⁶ These additional funds should be invested in rebuilding and retraining what is becoming a hollow force, as well as modernizing those capabilities most essential to deterring – and if necessary defeating – the growing threat from Iran under the JCPOA.

I thank you Mr. Chairman for my time, and I look forward to the Committee's questions.

⁶ United States Institute of Peace, *Ensuring a Strong U.S. Defense for the Future: The National Defense Panel Review of the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review* (Washington, DC: USIP, 2014), p. xi.