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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

(1604 WORDS, 5 MINUTES)

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, thank you so much for the opportunity to speak to the committee today.

I've been asked to present testimony on Iran, and I'll do so in my capacity as the former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Middle East policy in the Obama Administration. I left the Department of Defense last month, and my testimony today was cleared by the Department to ensure what I tell you remains at the appropriate level of classification. I don't need to remind any of you, though, that restricting our discussion to the unclassified level constrains what I can say about the way in which the Obama Administration addressed the challenges posed by Iran.

The United States has three vital interests in the Middle East: the security of the state of Israel, countering terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and freedom of navigation and commerce in and around

the Arabian Peninsula, which as you all know is home to vast hydrocarbon reserves.

Iran can and does pose a threat to all of those interests, and it does so in three ways: its nuclear program, its build-up of conventional arms, and what we call its asymmetric activities – its support to proxies such as Hizballah or some of the Shia militias in Iraq.

During the Obama Administration, we countered Iran through what we called our four Ps: our posture, our plans, our partners, and our preparedness.

With respect to our posture, we have about 35,000 troops in and around the Persian Gulf alone. We have major air bases in Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. We have a major naval base in Bahrain. These bases and the troops operating out of them allow us to both ensure freedom of navigation in and around the Arabian Peninsula, combat terror groups – for many of these troops are currently busy in the skies over Iraq and Syria – and deter conventional Iranian aggression against our Gulf partners.

We maintain a robust suite of plans to respond to regional contingencies. In my capacity at the Department of Defense, I reviewed these plans. They are real, they are resourced, and our forces are ready to execute them.

Over the past three decades, meanwhile, we have invested in our regional partnerships, and specifically, building capacity in our Gulf partners. We have a long way to go, but one of the areas where we have made the most progress – ballistic missile defense – helps us counter Iran’s build-up of conventional weapons. We also engaged in unprecedented levels of defense and intelligence cooperation with Israel while making available some of our most advanced U.S.-made weapons to Gulf partners.

Finally, we have our preparedness. We chose this word because we needed a fourth “p,” frankly, but what this really stands for is the many dozens of unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral exercises we conduct on an annual basis to help us prepare for regional contingencies.

So how are we doing? I’ll be blunt in my assessment and then offer some words of advice for this new administration as well as some words of caution for this committee. Specifically, I will argue that this

administration's strategic flirtation with Russia is incompatible with what I assess to be its desire to pressure and counter Iran.

First, the Department of Defense did not play a role in negotiating the nuclear deal with Iran, but the deal very much helps the U.S. military.

Despite all the *sturm und drang* here in Washington and elsewhere in the summer of 2015, most strategic planners with whom I have spoken – both here and in the region – see the deal as offering real, positive opportunities to both the United States and Iran.

As you know, the Department of Defense was always in charge of providing the enforcement mechanism for U.S. policy. If Iran cheats, we will know about it, and the Department of Defense is prepared to act accordingly. From our perspective, then, the nuclear deal was a pretty good deal because it constrained Iran while placing no such constraints on us.

Iran also has some opportunities, of course, and it appears to be largely squandering them. Some optimists in the Obama Administration had hoped the nuclear negotiations would be a way to bring Iran in from the cold, so to speak, and encourage Iran to play a more helpful role regionally. The view

of these optimists was not universally shared within the administration: many of us argued within the administration and to our allies that the reason we needed to sign this deal with Iran was not because Iran is a benign actor but because it is a malign actor – and thus needed to be prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons. Iran’s actions since signing the nuclear deal have somewhat vindicated us pessimists.

Iran continues a robust build-up of conventional weapons – including what we military folks would call anti-access, area denial weapons like anti-ship cruise missiles and air defense systems. I don’t think our military commanders are losing sleep over these weapons systems just yet, but I know our regional partners are. Here’s my first word of caution: these weapons systems, for the most part, are not indigenous to the Islamic Republic of Iran. These are Russian weapons, sold by Russia to Iran, with the aim of constraining U.S. freedom of maneuver in strategically important waterways and airways. Any serious effort to counter the build-up of these Iranian capabilities, then, has to take Russia into account.

Iran is also continuing what I will call its asymmetric activities. Its support to Shia and allied militia in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen continues. The

presence of anti-ship cruise missiles into Yemen is especially concerning since it threatens a key commercial waterway, the Bab al-Mandeb.

Let me be blunt again regarding the administration's overtures to Russia: in Syria, it will be exceptionally difficult and likely impossible to reach any kind of accommodation with Russia and the regime in Damascus that does not end up strengthening Iran and its proxies, including Hizballah. So before the administration goes down that path, they should recognize that in the short term at least, they are going to embolden some of the very people they have pledged to counter in the region. And they will embolden Iran and these groups to the detriment of Israel's security.

In Iraq, meanwhile, the Islamic State is on a clear path to defeat. But the long-term threat to Iraq's sovereignty is both Kurdish separatism and the Shia militias – many of them supported by Iran – that exist only loosely affiliated with the Iraqi state. In addition, Iraq's long-term stability will be dependent on the United States being able to keep a small contingent of trainers and special operators in the country – which is why the president's dismissive comments about the Iraqi government, his comments about how we should have taken Iraq's oil, and his ban on Iraqis coming to the United

States have been so strategically misguided. This all plays into the narrative of an Iran that very much views Iraq as a zero-sum game with the United States and has spent millions of dollars to convince Iraqis that we have the kind of malign attitudes toward Iraq that the president seems to, in fact, actually have but which few others share. If the United States wants to push back on that, it needs to do so in the president's words and with robust diplomacy. I would caution the administration from trying to push back on Iran or its proxies militarily in Iraq – at least for now. We still have a Sunni terrorist enemy to defeat in Iraq, and our 5,000 troops in Iraq need to focus on the fight against the Islamic State, not war with Iran's proxies. I fought in Iraq, and any of us who served there remember the ways in which Iran can make life miserable for U.S. troops there. We don't need that fight right now.

Finally, a few words on Yemen. We've talked about Islamic fundamentalism, but I'm somewhat of a freedom of navigation fundamentalist: the United States should be prepared to robustly counter any threats to key waterways, and I'm not going to lose any sleep if a couple of Houthis die because they made the error of firing an anti-ship cruise missile into the Bab al-Mandeb. I should note, though, that the vast, vast majority of

commercial traffic – roughly 1,400 vessels, or 80 million tons – that flows through the Bab al-Mandeb on a monthly basis is not American: it is from the European Union, India, China, and Korea. Those are the countries that have the most at stake in any actions which threaten shipping through the Bab al-Mandeb, and before the administration escalates a war in Yemen, it should start with some multilateral diplomacy telling Iran, in essence, to knock it off lest its own commercial interests fall under threat.

In Secretary Mattis, we have a Secretary of Defense who keenly understands the threat posed by Iran. And in Secretary Tillerson and Gary Cohn, we have, respectively, a Secretary of State and a Director of the Economic Council who understand the centrality of market access to hydrocarbon resources in the Gulf to the global economy.

So there's some cause for optimism that this administration will eventually put together a coherent strategy to counter Iran's malign activities in a way that serves U.S. interests. But the contradictions in the administration's strategic initiatives thus far, not to mention the alarming dysfunction within the national security decision-making process, leave plenty of room for worry as well.