

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs

Testimony of Stephen J. Hadley
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Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, Members of the Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

To provide context for today's hearing, I would like, if I may, to describe briefly what appears to me to have been the underlying dynamic that led to the recent confrontation between the United States and Iran in Iraq.

In the fall of last year, Iraqi citizens across their country demonstrated in massive numbers. They protested what they saw as the corruption, sectarianism, and ineffectiveness of their government. They protested the over-weening influence that Iran exercises in Iraq, both directly and through Iranian-backed militias. At least two Iranian consulates in Iraq were attacked and burned. Demonstrators even in the Shia south called for Iran to leave Iraq, chanting "Out, out Iran!".

Beginning last October, Kataib Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed militia, began an escalating series of attacks on Iraqi military bases hosting U.S. forces. I believe Kataib Hezbollah would not have acted without the approval of Iranian authorities in general and Qasem Soleimani in particular. And I believe this military campaign was a cynical effort to change the conversation within Iraq and to shift attention from the issue of Iranian influence to the issue of the U.S. force presence -- and ultimately to get U.S. forces thrown out of Iraq. The campaign escalated until a U.S. contractor was killed, at least 3 U.S. service personnel were wounded, and the U.S. embassy in Baghdad was attacked and partially burned.

Some commentators will say that by striking Qasem Soleimani, the United States fell into Kataib Hezbollah's trap. But what was the alternative? The United States could not just stand by while its military and diplomatic personnel were attacked and killed. The U.S. administration clearly believed that striking Soleimani was so unexpected and so significant both militarily and politically that it would cause Iran to abandon its military campaign against U.S. troops and diplomats in Iraq. We should all hope that it has that effect.

The problem was that the strike occurred in Iraq. The fear of becoming the central battleground in a military confrontation between the United States and Iran

is being used to justify calls for the expulsion of U.S. forces from Iraq. But a U.S. withdrawal would only reward Kataib Hezbollah's campaign of violence, strengthen the Iranian-backed militias, weaken the Iraqi government, undermine Iraqi sovereignty, and jeopardize the fight against ISIS -- a terrible outcome for both the United States and Iraq.

To keep U.S. forces in Iraq, Iraqi authorities will have to manage the domestic political fallout from the strike on Soleimani. The U.S administration and the Congress can help by making public statements reaffirming: (1) that America respects the sovereignty and independence of Iraq; (2) that U.S. forces are in Iraq to train Iraqi security forces and to help them protect the Iraqi people from a resurgent ISIS; (3) that the United States will coordinate with the Iraqi government on matters involving the U.S. troop presence; (4) that so long as U.S. troops and diplomats in Iraq are not threatened, America's confrontation with Iran will not be played out on Iraqi territory; and (5) that the United States supports the aspirations of the Iraqi people for a government that can meet their needs and expectations and is free of corruption, sectarianism, and outside influence.

After Iran's recent missile attacks in retaliation for the strike on Soleimani, both Iran and the United States appear to have stood down militarily. Despite

some tough, uncompromising statements, both sides have said they want to avoid war and have left the door open for negotiations. Neither Iran nor the United States appears positioned or inclined to mount a diplomatic initiative, so that role must be played by third parties. The European countries that participated in the JCPOA nuclear deal (especially France), America's regional allies (particularly the UAE), and Russian President Vladimir Putin are all potential candidates.

Iran's current policy is going nowhere. New economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. administration could reignite the massive public demonstrations that Iran put down last fall only with brutal force. Iran's leaders in the past have been pragmatic when their hold on power was threatened. However grudgingly, they may decide that negotiations are the least bad option. For its part, the U.S. administration still says that its goal is to begin negotiations to address Iran's nuclear, ballistic missile, and regional activities. Now may be the time to give diplomacy a chance.