

**OPENING STATEMENT
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THE UNITED STATES HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

FROM SANCTIONS TO THE SOLEIMANI STRIKE TO ESCALATION:
EVALUATING THE ADMINISTRATION'S IRAN POLICY**

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Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and Distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me. I am honored to be here today.

We are at a dangerous point with Iran and consequently, it is a propitious moment at which to step back and evaluate U.S. policy regarding Iran and whether it is likely to serve our longer-term objectives in the region. During my time in government, our goals were to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon and to diminish and counter Iran's threatening and destabilizing behavior, from its growing ballistic missile arsenal, to its dangerous use of regional proxies, to its human rights abuses at home – all while avoiding a war with Iran. These are still the right goals in my view and in fact, they are not dissimilar to those articulated by the current Administration, but our approach seems designed to undermine these objectives rather than further them. If we are to correct the course we are on, it is useful to understand how we arrived at this juncture.

A fundamental pillar of U.S. Iran policy was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA, which was at the center of our efforts precisely because we realized that a nuclear-armed Iran would make the broader challenges all the more threatening and all the more difficult, if not impossible, to address. While not perfect, the JCPOA cut off Iran's pathways to acquiring a bomb, significantly constrained Iran's nuclear program, and subjected Iran to an unprecedented and strict monitoring and verification regime, thereby halting and even reversing Iran's progress toward a nuclear weapon for at least the next decade, while the prohibition on Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon was permanent. The JCPOA was never intended, however, to stand alone but rather was seen as part of a wider regional strategy that sought to reduce Iran's destabilizing influence in the region, strengthen those voices in Iran who were pushing back against the Iranian government's threatening policies, and engage Iran diplomatically to avoid inadvertent escalation while also putting pressure on the Iranian regime, including through the use of other non-military pressure tactics such as sanctions, to change Iran's unacceptable behavior at home and abroad.

When President Trump announced in May of 2018 his plans to withdraw from the JCPOA and re-impose economic sanctions, he indicated that he was doing so to compel better Iranian behavior across the Middle East and to force Iran back to the table to accept an improved deal, which would deter the regime's destabilizing activities in the region, include restrictions on Tehran's ballistic missiles program, and give inspectors unlimited access without process. Of

course, none of this has come about and instead the situation has deteriorated considerably. Walking away from the JCPOA and imposing new U.S. sanctions on Iran drove a wedge between the United States and our long-term allies in Europe, and while the pressure of those sanctions has been formidable with inflation at 50 percent and a decline from 2.5 million barrels per day of oil exports to as little as a couple hundred thousand this past summer, the result has been that Iran conducted increasingly provocative actions in the gulf and restarted significant aspects of their suspended nuclear program in ways that are inconsistent with the deal. American allies and partners, rather than being organized into a coalition to help address Iranian behavior during this period, are instead concerned with what they perceive to be unpredictable and escalatory behavior on the part of both countries and have focused their efforts on trying to deescalate the situation. Meanwhile, the withdrawal from the JCPOA strengthened the hardline voices in Tehran within their factional political system, as it was seen as a validation of their skepticism regarding the deal and diplomacy with the West more generally. We are now as far away from the negotiating table as one could imagine with no real hope for another deal that would further restrict Iran's nuclear program, let alone any other destabilizing activities, such as their ballistic missile program.

This was predictable and predicted. Economic pressure on Iran can, as it did in the lead up to the JCPOA, affect the domestic political calculus associated with making a deal with the United States and the Europeans to restrain their nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief, but no Iranian analyst will tell you that economic sanctions are likely to have a meaningful impact on the Regime's capacity to engage in destabilizing actions in the region. That is because the availability of resources for foreign proxies – a relatively small budget line item -- has never been a serious constraint on Iran's regional interference. Moreover, to avoid disrupting the deal, the JCPOA was acting as a relative constraint on particularly aggressive behavior by the Iranian regime against the United States. One has only to note, as others have, that we did not see the kinds of Iran-backed militia attacks against U.S. personnel that we have seen over the last many months while the deal was in effect, to see the truth of this. Instead, Iran responded to this "maximum pressure" campaign with a series of steps intended to put pressure on the United States, including targeting American facilities and assets directly and through proxies, targeting shipping in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, shooting down an American drone, attacking Saudi Oil facilities, the violence in front of our Embassy in Baghdad, and, of course, the recent tragic killing of an American contractor by Iran-backed militias in Kirkuk.

Instead of carefully managing the escalation by responding with measured, necessary and proportionate actions intended to effectively push back on such aggressive behavior by Iran, to deescalate and deter further attacks, the Administration seemingly stepped back in a way that may have even encouraged the Iranians to continue until the President finally decided to respond by engaging in a targeted killing of Iran's most powerful commander, without the consent of our partners, the Iraqis, where the strike took place – nor seemingly with any consultation of our NATO or coalition partners in Iraq despite the impact it would have on their operations.

As many have noted, Soleimani was an enemy of the United States who backed various operations against the United States and is responsible for the killing of Americans but the question is not whether Soleimani deserved his fate. The question is whether this was a wise action that served U.S. national interests and ultimately made us safer. The Administration, of

course, has argued that the action was taken in self-defense to disrupt imminent attacks and was necessary to save lives. The comments of the Secretary of Defense this past Sunday appear to contradict that assertion, particularly insofar as the expectation was that targeting Soleimani was the only option for disrupting an imminent attack against U.S. persons within a certain window of opportunity. Instead, the action appears to have been taken largely to send a message to the Iranians and to potentially disrupt further, unspecified attacks. Yet, if that was the case, it surely was done without an apparent understanding of the consequences. Additionally, without an imminent attack at stake for which this action was judged to be the only reasonable way of preventing, not only will our allies and partners view it as a violation of international law but it is virtually impossible to understand why it was impractical for the President and his senior leadership to consult with the Congress, our allies, and Iraq before targeting Soleimani, in a military action that quite predictably would be perceived by Iran as an armed attack and an effective declaration of war by the United States. All of you will be better positioned to know whether the classified information tells a different story, but either way, one cannot ignore the implications of this particular action, which are significant from a broader national security and foreign policy perspective.

Directly following the strike, we sent thousands of additional U.S. troops to the region to defend our people and our assets in light of an expected, and I would emphasize ongoing, Iranian response to the killing of Soleimani, thereby putting more Americans in harms way. We have brought the fight against ISIL, a national security imperative, to a virtual standstill, with NATO suspending its training mission on the ground in Iraq, with the ISIL Coalition noting that it is now “fully committed to protecting the Iraqi bases that host Coalition troops” rather than fighting ISIL, and with the Iraqi parliament passing a resolution that calls for the ejection of all U.S. troops from Iraq. We have strengthened the Iranian-backed elements of the Iraqi government, weakened those who have supported the United States, and we have lost standing in the region. Iran announced that it will move farther away from the deal by restarting additional elements of its nuclear program and the United States is more isolated than ever, with the deal that President Trump indicated he wants, farther from our reach than ever before.

Furthermore, despite the optimism in President Trump’s statement following Iran’s attack on two Iraqi military bases that house U.S. troops that Iran appears to be “standing down,” the statements made by the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps make clear that is not the case, as they are focused on pushing U.S troops and influence out of the region and without an available diplomatic path, they have no incentive to pull back from exercising their own form of pressure on the United States. We should be prepared for cyberattacks, more attacks on energy infrastructure, terrorist attacks and even potential attempts to assassinate U.S. officials. Moreover, the suggestion that we are energy independent and that as a consequence, Iranian impact on the world’s oil supply will have no impact on the United States is simply wrong. As the Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs has indicated, although the United States is close to becoming a net oil exporter, we are not immune to shocks in supply. The Middle East remains critical to oil markets and disruptions there can still cause pain for consumers in the United States.

I wish we were not where we are today vis-à-vis Iran but we need to deal with the reality of the current situation and try to construct a policy that is in the best interest of the United States. I do

not, unfortunately, think we are likely to achieve the long-term objectives we once had and thus, it may be sensible for us to reexamine the situation and take stock of our core interests and reframe our ambition. The Middle East is important, but we face more consequential geopolitical challenges in other places, perhaps most obviously in Asia, and as such we need to manage our investment of resources in this region in a way that reflects the opportunity costs that our investments will bear. Additionally, we need to engage with our allies and partners outside of the region, as well as partners in the region, in order to promote a more stable order that better promotes security, human rights, and civic engagement, despite the slow progress this is likely to see over the coming years. We desperately need to invest in diplomatic efforts, ideally with our allies, to reduce existing tensions and identify a plausible path forward toward negotiations, so as to provide hope of a way forward that does not inexorably lead, as we are now positioned, to a scenario in which the Administration finds itself facing the choice the JCPOA was designed to avoid – that is, the choice of either letting Iran obtain a nuclear weapon or bombing Iran and thus launching what could easily become a full-scale regional war that the United States finds itself dragged into, having forgotten the lessons of our past.

Let me just end by thanking you again for your work on these issues and your efforts to advance the interests of Americans who rely on the government for their security and prosperity. I look forward to answering any questions you may have, to the best of my ability.