

Congressional Testimony

The Iran-Syria Nexus and its Implications for the Region

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Introduction

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today about Iran's influence in Syria, U.S policy, and regional implications.

Thank you for having this hearing specifically on the topic of the Iran-Syria nexus. The more we talk about Iran's machinations in Syria as a window into the soul of the Iranian regime, as well as its regional intentions, the better. The Iranian regime does not want the world to talk about its involvement in Syria.

As we are only a few days away from the inauguration of Iranian President-elect Hassan Rouhani, I will focus my testimony on the consequences of his election for Iran's role in Syria, what Rouhani's past positions on the Syrian conflict and Iran's nuclear program reveal about possible policy changes, if any, under a new Iranian government, and recommendations for the appropriate U.S. policy response.

Everyone who seeks a free and democratic Iran, a peaceful resolution to the ongoing war in Syria, and an end to the nuclear crisis with Tehran should welcome the end of the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad era. But the election victory of Mr. Rouhani as the new president of the Islamic Republic of Iran has revived a myth as old as that of the revolutionary theocracy, itself: The myth of moderation.

In Iran and abroad, Mr. Rouhani's electoral victory has created an atmosphere of optimism not seen since Mohammad Khatami's presidency (1997-2005), which ended in disappointment for those who believed Mr. Khatami would transform the Islamic Republic into a more moderate regime.

It is understandable to hope that Mr. Rouhani's victory might usher in more freedom for Iran's brutalized people, and that his purportedly moderate policies might even lead him transform Tehran's policies on Syria and on Iran's nuclear program. Indeed, this is the real test of Mr. Rouhani's moderation. Were he a true moderate, he would insist that Iran and its terrorist subsidiary Hezbollah stop assisting the Assad regime to murder Syrians, free all political prisoners in Iran, end the brutality and repression of Iranians, and fully comply with its nuclear obligations under international law.

This optimism, however, may not be warranted. And, if indeed, his moderation is aspirational on our part and not real when it comes to Syria or the nuclear file, crafting misguided policies that allow Iran to consolidate its grip on Syria, or permit Iran to dash to a nuclear weapon, could be irreversible and a grave danger to the U.S. and our allies. While Iran's long suffering people and a weary international community are cheering desperately for Mr. Rouhani to emerge as a champion of moderation, he is likely to meet resistance from other power centers such as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). This was the fate of Mr. Khatami, who was politically emasculated by Khamenei and the IRGC.

But even if he could successfully exert influence over Iran's foreign policies, I regretfully would argue that Mr. Rouhani is not a moderate capable of forging genuine compromises, as an examination of his record will demonstrate. Rather, he is regime loyalist, and a master of nuclear deception, who has played an intimate role in the belligerent foreign policies of the Islamic Republic since its founding. As such, Mr. Rouhani can be expected to maintain course on two of the most troubling Iranian policies: the mass killings in Syria and the illicit nuclear program.

The testimony concludes that:

1. Mr. Rouhani will have little influence on both the Syria and nuclear files, which, as two of the Islamic Republic of Iran's most important strategic priorities, remain in the hands of Iran's Supreme Leader.
2. Mr. Rouhani is not a moderate on Iran's Syria policy; his public statements reveal that his worldview and positions on Syria are closely aligned with Iran's Supreme Leader and the IRGC.
3. While Mr. Rouhani's nuclear track record reveals public disagreement with how his predecessors have conducted nuclear negotiations with the P5+1, he has been a practitioner of nuclear deceit and subterfuge, who has misled the international community while relentlessly pursuing a nuclear weapons program. His nuclear track record suggests that he cannot be trusted to deliver on any Iranian commitment to end the bloodshed in Syria.
4. There are concrete steps, however, that Mr. Rouhani can take on Syria if he wants to prove himself as a peaceful, reliable and transparent interlocutor with the international community. By taking seven specific steps to end Iran and Hezbollah's role in Syria, he could prove both his willingness and ability to depart from the policies of Khamenei and the IRGC. But stopping the massacre of Syrian Muslim and Christian women and children should not be rewarded with sanctions relief or any other concession. It should be the definition of moderation.
5. U.S. policy should be designed to treat Iran's Syria and nuclear policies in the same way that Tehran views them: As two-sides of the same coin and essential strategic elements of Iran's drive for regional hegemony. But Washington must resist all efforts by Tehran to combine these two files in diplomatic talks and leverage one against the other in trading concessions.
6. Only massively intensified pressure from Washington and its allies – through crippling sanctions, aggressive diplomacy, and the credible threat (and selective application) of force, either directly or through the support of allied proxies – can help Washington reverse the strategic gains that Tehran has made in both Syria and on its nuclear program. Only then can Washington possibly convert its leverage into any negotiated settlement on both fronts that protects the security interests of the United States and its Middle Eastern allies.

Is President Rouhani Likely to be in Charge of Iran's Foreign and Security Policy?

It would be naïve to expect a significant shift in the foreign and security policies of the Islamic Republic because of the outcome of the presidential election.

With the exception of President Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's first term in office, a time when Ali Khamenei still was consolidating his position as the Supreme Leader, Iran's history does not provide any other example of presidents making strategic decisions on their own. Rather, the Supreme Defense Council in the 1980s and the Supreme National Security Council since the end of the Iran/Iraq war (1980-1988) have made all the strategic decisions. In the Supreme National Security Council, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the IRGC, particularly the Quds Force, the extraterritorial operations branch of the Revolutionary Guards, dominate the executive branch.

Iran's decision-making concerning Syria provides a case in point:

The Iranian regime views Syria as a fundamental strategic priority, and, as a result, Syria policy is handled by Iran's Supreme Leader with operational control in the hands of Major General Qassem Suleimani, the Revolutionary Guards Quds Force commander. Suleimani has on numerous occasions made it clear to the United States military that he alone makes the final decisions with regard to Iran's policy in the Middle East and North Africa.¹ By comparison, President-elect Rouhani would have little say concerning Tehran's policy towards Syria.

Hezbollah, a subsidiary of the IRGC, is a tool at Suleimani's disposal for Syria. Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, paid a visit to Tehran on April 29, 2013, on the eve of Hezbollah's offensive in Qusayr, which proved to be a key battle in reversing the momentum of the Syrian rebels. His visit underscored Syria's importance to the Supreme Leader. As my FDD colleague and Syria expert Tony Badran observed: "Nasrallah had to travel to Tehran and meet with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Quds Force commander Qassem Suleimani. There, he was reportedly told to go all in, regardless of the cost."²

A reporter close to Hezbollah added that during this trip, Nasrallah received the necessary religious ruling from Khamenei for the Hezbollah offensive in Syria.³ This is in keeping with the doctrine of *vilayat-e faqih* to which Hezbollah adheres, and which establishes Khamenei's primacy as the key decision-maker. No one consulted President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, because, as the head of the executive branch, he has no say in strategic questions (and, by then, had fallen out of the Supreme Leader's favor).

As Iran's president, Rouhani will defer to Khamenei and Suleimani on Syria policy, while busying himself with the diplomatic responsibility of presenting Iran's case to the world.

¹ "CENTCOM in 2010: Views from General David H. Petraeus," Institute for the Study of War, www.understandingwar.org/press-media/webcast/centcom-2010-views-general-david-h-petraeus-video (accessed January 4, 2011).

² Tony Badran, "Hezbollah Slips in Qusayr," *NOW*, May 23, 2013.

(<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/hezbollah-slips-in-qusayr>)

³ Ali Mughniyeh, *Al-Ra'i*, June 12, 2013. (<http://www.alraimedia.com/Article.aspx?id=442843>)

Is Hassan Rouhani a “Moderate” on Syria?

Even if Mr. Rouhani can exert influence on the Islamic Republic’s Syria policy, his record does not suggest that he would take it in a “moderate” direction. Mr. Rouhani is a supreme loyalist, and a true believer, who lived in Paris in exile with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and followed him to Iran in 1979. He was a political commissar in the regular military, where he purged some of Iran’s finest officers. He was a member of the Supreme Defense Council responsible for the continuation of the Iran-Iraq War, at great cost in Iranian lives, even after Iran achieved its territorial goals. He rose to become both Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator (2003 to 2005), under former Iranian presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and his successor Mohammad Khatami (1997 to 2005), secretary of Iran’s powerful Supreme National Security Council (1989 to 2005), and the representative of the Supreme Leader to the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (2005-present).

As a trusted advisor to Khamenei, and, since 2005, the representative of the Supreme Leader to the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Mr. Rouhani remained a regime insider during the two-and-a-half years of Syria’s bloody war, which began in 2011. During this time, there is no indication from the public record that Mr. Rouhani fundamentally disagreed with the path charted by Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and IRGC Quds Force leader Qassem Suleimani, Iran’s operational commander in Syria.

Foreign policy decision-makers in Washington and abroad have asked for patience before judging Mr. Rouhani’s record. They point to Mr. Rouhani’s election campaign rhetoric, as compared to his competitors, where Mr. Rouhani ran on a “policy of reconciliation and peace,” and where, on the nuclear issue, he criticized nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili and Ahmadinejad for reckless diplomacy that united the international community in support of unprecedented global sanctions.

However, in contrast to his public criticisms of the way in which Jalili and Ahmadinejad had conducted nuclear negotiations – and this is a question of style not substance as I’ll make clear below – there is little evidence of similar criticisms by Rouhani of the regime’s Syria policy. Rouhani’s frequent and lengthy statements on Syria, including some issued during the election campaign, are revealing about how he will govern as president; his relative influence in the Iranian power structure, and his strategy in upcoming nuclear negotiations with the P5+1.

These statements reveal a conspiratorial worldview not unlike that espoused by Khamenei and the IRGC; they provide no evidence of any disagreement with the Iranian regime’s Syria policy; and they underscore the clear contradiction between Rouhani’s sometimes less-belligerent rhetoric and his support for the regime’s operational brutality.

As my FDD colleague and Iranian scholar Ali Alfoneh has revealed through translations and analysis, Rouhani’s statements on the Syria conflict depict a worldview, which is: (1) based on a core conspiracy theory that all international affairs are controlled by Israel and the United States; (2) Iran-centric with a belief that Iran is the eternal victim of that

conspiracy; and, (3) largely corresponds with the worldview of Supreme Leader Khamenei and IRGC leaders.

However, unlike the crude and offensive language of his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Rouhani is an effective strategic communicator, deploying soft and sophisticated language, where appropriate, to appeal to a global audience, and using social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook to amplify his message.

Rouhani's statements on Syria reflect an understanding of all international politics as a conspiracy against Iran

On October 28, 2011 in an interview with the daily *E'temad*, Rouhani discussed the anti-government uprising in Syria.⁴ In the course of the interview, Rouhani depicted Syria as a regional anomaly rather than as part of the Arab Spring, or “Islamic Awakening,” as it is called in the official Islamic Republic parlance. “Developments in Syria are totally different than in other countries,” Rouhani said.⁵ “In all these countries, the revolt is against authoritarianism and foreign colonialism, but in Syria, the issue is sectarian ... This is why we are opposed to certain activities in Syria. We see that the neighboring countries are intervening, and such interventions are not desirable from our point of view.”⁶

Rouhani also elaborated on the motivations of external powers to intervene in the conflict in Syria, which he fundamentally depicted as an American and Israeli conspiracy aimed at undermining the “resistance” to Israel.⁷ Rouhani explained that the conflict in Syria, in reality, was a conspiracy against Iran. He argued that, as a result of the U.S. “failure” to

⁴ “Tote’eh-ye Se-Zel’i-ye Jadid-e Gharb Alayh-e Iran Be Revayat-e Doktor Hassan Rouhani,” [The West’s New Triangular Conspiracy Against Iran According to Dr. Rouhani], *E’temad* (Iran), October 28, 2011.

(<http://peace-ipsc.org/fa/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A6%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%B6%D9%84%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7/>)

⁵ “Tote’eh-ye Se-Zel’i-ye Jadid-e Gharb Alayh-e Iran Be Revayat-e Doktor Hassan Rouhani,” [The West’s New Triangular Conspiracy Against Iran According to Dr. Rouhani], *E’temad* (Iran), October 28, 2011.

(<http://peace-ipsc.org/fa/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A6%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%B6%D9%84%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7/>)

⁶ “Tote’eh-ye Se-Zel’i-ye Jadid-e Gharb Alayh-e Iran Be Revayat-e Doktor Hassan Rouhani,” [The West’s New Triangular Conspiracy Against Iran According to Dr. Rouhani], *E’temad* (Iran), October 28, 2011.

(<http://peace-ipsc.org/fa/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A6%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%B6%D9%84%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7/>)

⁷ “Tote’eh-ye Se-Zel’i-ye Jadid-e Gharb Alayh-e Iran Be Revayat-e Doktor Hassan Rouhani,” [The West’s New Triangular Conspiracy Against Iran According to Dr. Rouhani], *E’temad* (Iran), October 28, 2011.

(<http://peace-ipsc.org/fa/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A6%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%B6%D9%84%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7/>)

mobilize a unanimous vote against Iran at the U.N. Security Council, and in light of the Arab Spring, which swept away Western allies in the Middle East and North Africa, Washington had no choice but to bring down the Assad government:

“Their [the West’s] main problem is that they are unsuccessful in the Security Council, meaning that they can’t advance the sanctions against Iran as they wish,” Rouhani said, adding, “As they are losing their allies in the region, we feel that the Zionists and the Americans are attacking the ‘front of resistance’ and countries which resist the Zionists...”⁸

Elaborating on the role of Israel, Rouhani said: “Behind the scenes, the Zionist pressure in the United States, is because Israel has lost its main friends in the region. [Egypt’s Hosni] Mubarak and [Tunisia’s Zine al-Abidine] Ben Ali were overthrown and in Jordan too the situation is not suitable... The raid against the Israeli embassy in Egypt [in 2011] is a disaster for the Israelis. The Israelis see that what they have built in the past fifteen or twenty years has all been lost.”⁹

As demonstrated below, Mr. Rouhani’s views echo those of the Supreme Leader and the IRGC.

Rouhani’s worldview largely corresponds with the paranoid worldview of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)

Though often described as moderate, Rouhani’s perspective largely corresponds with the paranoid worldview of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the IRGC, and other hardliners. A few examples illustrate these similarities:

Statement by Rouhani: “Developments in Syria are totally different than in other countries [which experience the ‘Islamic Awakening]’.”¹⁰

⁸ “Tote’eh-ye Se-Zel’i-ye Jadid-e Gharb Alayh-e Iran Be Revayat-e Doktor Hassan Rouhani,” [The West’s New Triangular Conspiracy Against Iran According to Dr. Rouhani], *E’temad* (Iran), October 28, 2011. (<http://peace-ipsc.org/fa/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A6%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%B6%D9%84%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7/>)

⁹ “Tote’eh-ye Se-Zel’i-ye Jadid-e Gharb Alayh-e Iran Be Revayat-e Doktor Hassan Rouhani,” [The West’s New Triangular Conspiracy Against Iran According to Dr. Rouhani], *E’temad* (Iran), October 28, 2011. (<http://peace-ipsc.org/fa/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A6%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%B6%D9%84%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7/>)

¹⁰ “Tote’eh-ye Se-Zel’i-ye Jadid-e Gharb Alayh-e Iran Be Revayat-e Doktor Hassan Rouhani,” [The West’s New Triangular Conspiracy Against Iran According to Dr. Rouhani], *E’temad* (Iran), October 28, 2011. (<http://peace-ipsc.org/fa/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A6%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%B6%D9%84%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7/>)

Similar statement by Supreme Leader Khamenei: “The essence of the ‘Islamic Awakening’ in the region is an anti-Zionist and anti-American movement, but in the events of Syria, the hand of the United States and Israel is visible.”¹¹

Statement by Rouhani: “As they are losing their allies in the region, we feel that the Zionists and the Americans are attacking the ‘front of resistance’ and countries which resist the Zionists...”¹²

Similar statement by Supreme Leader Khamenei: “The reality of the affairs in Syria is some governments led by the United States and some other powers waging a war per proxy against the government of Syria, aiming at securing the interests of the Zionist regime and dealing blows to the ‘resistance’ in the region.”¹³

Similar statement by Brigadier General Ramezan Sharif, Revolutionary Guards Public Relations commander: “There is no doubt about the fact that the Guards considers Syria the frontline of ‘the resistance...’ Today, the Global Arrogance is trying to crush the frontline of the struggle against Arrogance, and the Islamic Republic of Iran considers this a threat to all Muslims... Syria is paying the price for defending the Palestinian nation and defending all Muslims in the face of the ‘front of Arrogance.’ It is natural that we support them and extend assistance to it.”¹⁴

Statement by Rouhani: “Machinations of the West in Syria are conspiracies against Iran.”¹⁵

¹¹ “Jowhareh-ye Bidari-ye Eslami Dar Keshvarha-ye Mantaqeh...” [The Essence of the Islamic Awakening in the Region...], *Paygah-e Ettela-e-Resani-ye Daftar-e Maqam-e Moazzam-e Rahbari* (Iran), June 30, 2011. (<http://www.leader.ir/langs/fa/index.php?p=contentShow&id=8267>)

¹² “Tote’eh-ye Se-Zel’i-ye Jadid-e Gharb Alayh-e Iran Be Revayat-e Doktor Hassan Rouhani,” [The West’s New Triangular Conspiracy Against Iran According to Dr. Rouhani], *E’temad* (Iran), October 28, 2011. (<http://peace-ipsoc.org/fa/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A6%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%B6%D9%84%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7/>)

¹³ “Dar Didar-e Nokhost-Vazir-e Iraq Matrah Shod,” [Discussed at the Meeting With the Iraqi Prime Minister], *Paygah-e Ettela-e-Resani-ye Daftar-e Maqam-e Moazzam-e Rahbari* (Iran), August 31, 2012. (<http://www.leader.ir/langs/fa/index.php?p=contentShow&id=9731>)

¹⁴ “Goftegou ba Sardar Sharif Darbareh-ye Nesbat-e Sepah Ba Souriyeh...” [Conversation with Commander Sharif About the Guards’ Relationship with Syria], *Parsine* (Iran), July 1, 2012. (<http://www.parsine.com/fa/news/63190/%DA%AF%D9%81%D8%AA%DA%AF%D9%88-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%81-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%94-%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D8%B3%D9%BE%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D9%88-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA>)

¹⁵ “Tote’eh-ye Se-Zel’i-ye Jadid-e Gharb Alayh-e Iran Be Revayat-e Doktor Hassan Rouhani,” [The West’s New Triangular Conspiracy Against Iran According to Dr. Rouhani], *E’temad* (Iran), October 28, 2011. (<http://peace-ipsoc.org/fa/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A6%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%B6%D9%84%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7/>)

*Similar statement by Major General Rahim Safavi of the IRGC: “External enemies such as the United States and the Zionists – who are the sworn enemies of the revolution – along with some Arab countries and Turkey, are trying to pressure Syria in an attempt to topple its government before the [presidential] election in Iran.”*¹⁶

Indeed, only a month after Rouhani issued a statement opposing terrorism and foreign interference inside Syria (more below on the real meaning of that statement), he publicly pledged his support for the Assad regime, and Hezbollah, reaffirming that Iranian-Syrian ties will be able to confront “enemies in the region, especially the Zionist regime.”¹⁷

As these examples demonstrate, Rouhani’s worldview and statements do not differ significantly from those of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards. This does not bode well for the prospects of a more moderate Syria policy with Rouhani at the helm of the executive.

Rouhani, like Khamenei and the IRGC, sees Syria as a strategic priority where Iran’s interests must be pursued relentlessly.

Rouhani’s rhetoric reveals several important insights into Syria’s importance to the Iranian regime: First, the almost identical talking points, repeated across the board by regime officials, suggests a strategic message crafted or approved by Khamenei and disseminated throughout Iran’s power structure. Second, this message discipline, in turn, reflects the reality that Syria is a matter of the highest strategic importance for Khamenei and the Iranian regime as a whole. Third, in viewing Syria as the exception to the other Arab revolts – which they viewed as the overturning of the pro-American regional order and the toppling of U.S. regional allies – statements by Rouhani and other regime statements reveal that Iran’s power elite regard Syria as a key front that they must defend in order to preserve their interests and continue the push for regional primacy.

While Iran is made up of 34 provinces, Mehdi Taeb, a member of the Supreme Leader’s inner circle, labeled Syria “the 35th district of Iran.” Taeb went on to say that Syria “has greater strategic importance for Iran than Khuzestan,” referring to one of Iran’s outlying provinces. “If we lose Syria we will not even be able to keep Tehran.” In other words, in the eyes of Iran’s leaders, Syria is already a part of Iran.¹⁸

<http://www.isna.ir/fa/news/92020704544/%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B5%D9%81%D9%88%DB%8C-%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%AA-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%A7%D8%B2>

¹⁶ “Mikhahand Dowlat-e Souriyeh Ra Qabl az Entekhabat-e Iran Sarnegoun Konand” [They Want to Overthrow the Government in Syria Prior to the Election in Iran], *ISNA* (Iran), April 27, 2013.

<http://www.isna.ir/fa/news/92020704544/%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B5%D9%81%D9%88%DB%8C-%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%AA-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%A7%D8%B2>

¹⁷ “New Iran President Backs Syria’s Assad, Hezbollah,” *Associated Press*, July 16, 2013.

<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/new-iran-president-backs-syrias-assad-hezbollah>

¹⁸ Ali Alfoneh, “What Is Iran Doing in Syria?” *Foreign Policy*, September 21, 2012.

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/21/what_is_iran_doing_in_syria

Iran's Syria policy and its nuclear policy are two sides of the same coin. They both represent essential components of the Iranian regime's drive for regional hegemony. In both cases, the regime is playing to win, while it may perceive, (not without justification) that its adversaries are simply playing not to lose.

Rouhani's statements on Syria reveal a clear contradiction between moderate rhetoric and operational brutality.

Rouhani's more moderate-sounding statements on Syria need to be understood in a broader strategic context to understand their real meaning. This will help explain the striking contradiction between these statements and the regime's policy in Syria.

Stopping the killing and confronting extremism and terrorism

In June 2013, Rouhani said: "[Iran's] first priority is to stop the killings [in Syria] and confront extremism/terrorism..."¹⁹ While this may appear to be a moderate statement, it actually echoes Assad's rhetoric, and is deliberately coded. It reflects Assad's position, which is to label the entire uprising against his rule as "terrorism."

In November 2012, Rouhani said: "The most important problem is the... activities of terrorist groups in this country [Syria]."²⁰ In reality, Iran is sending in the Iranian-backed terrorist group Hezbollah,²¹ Iranian-backed Iraqi militias,²² as well as units of its own IRGC²³ to join the massacre against Syrian opposition forces and civilians. In a show of support for Hezbollah, Rouhani sent a cable just last week to Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah praising the terrorist organization's "jihad" against Israel, adding further that Hezbollah is the "hope... for victory against Israel."²⁴

Opposition to foreign interference in Syria:

¹⁹ @HassanRouhani, "#Rouhani: #Syria has been/is at front with Israel..our first priority is to stop killing, confront extremism/terrorism." *Twitter*, June 3, 2013. (<https://twitter.com/HassanRouhani/status/341620468849188864>)

²⁰ "Iran Dar Hich Sharayeti Az Hoqouq-e Qanouni-ye Khod Nakhahad Gozasht" [Iran Will Under No Circumstance Forfeit Its Legal Rights], *Markaz-e Tahqiqat-e Estratezhik* (Iran), November 13, 2012. (<http://www.csr.ir/Center.aspx?lng=fa&subid=-1&cntid=2610>)

²¹ Mona Alami, "Hezbollah in the Fight in Syria to Win, Backed By Iran," *USA Today*, June 6, 2013. (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/06/06/hezbollah-syria/2394617/>)

²² Michael R. Gordon & Steven Lee Myers, "Iran and Hezbollah Support for Syria Complicates Peace-Talk Strategy," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2013. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/22/world/middleeast/iran-and-hezbollahs-support-for-syria-complicates-us-strategy-on-peace-talks.html?pagewanted=all>)

²³ *Quds Online*. <http://www.qudsonline.ir/NSite/FullStory/News/?Id=50685>.

²⁴ "Iran's Rowhani Praises Hizbullah's 'Jihad' against Israel," *Naharnet Newsdesk* (Insert country), July 24, 2013. (<http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/91744>)

In June 2013, Rouhani said: “We’re opposed to...foreign interference [in Syria].”²⁵ In reality, Iran’s deployment of IRGC Ground Forces into Syria – Iran’s internal security forces typically responsible for domestic operations inside Iran and which are rarely deployed abroad - is a notable expansion of Iran’s military force beyond its borders.²⁶

In October 2011, Rouhani chastised the Saudis who “pursue the overthrow of the Bashar government,” because they are “displeased” with “consolidation” of Bashar al-Assad’s rule in Syria. Rouhani also accused the Turkish government of miscalculating the balance of power in Syria,²⁷ and lectured the Turks not to be “the advance guard of NATO, but take a position as a neighboring Muslim country,”²⁸ when dealing with the crisis in Syria.

What Rouhani is suggesting, consistent with the Khamenei and the IRGC’s position, is that Iran’s regime is opposed to any interference other than its own (or Russia’s), which is designed to ensure Assad’s survival. They want to ensure that Syria remains their exclusive sphere of influence.

Operational support for the continued massacre of Syrians

While remaining the personal representative to the Supreme Leader on Iran’s most powerful foreign policy and national security body, Rouhani has been complicit in the slaughter of tens of thousands of Syrians. Iran has armed²⁹ and trained³⁰ thousands of Syrian regime forces and paramilitary auxiliaries. In recent months, Iran has significantly stepped up military support to Assad, a fact acknowledged by Iraq’s foreign minister who

²⁵ @HassanRouhani, “The ones who should decide future of \$Syria are Syrian people themselves. We're opposed to terrorism and foreign #interference.” *Twitter*, June 17, 2013. (<https://twitter.com/HassanRouhani/status/346599807026094081>)

²⁶ Will Fulton, “How Deeply is Iran Enmeshed in Syria?” *USIP Iran Primer*, May 6, 2013. (<http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2013/may/06/how-deeply-iran-enmeshed-syria>)

²⁷ “Tote’eh-ye Se-Zel’i-ye Jadid-e Gharb Alayh-e Iran Be Revayat-e Doktor Hassan Rouhani.” [The West’s New Triangular Conspiracy Against Iran According to Dr. Rouhani], *E’temad* (Iran), October 28, 2011. (<http://peace-ipsc.org/fa/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A6%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%B6%D9%84%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7/>)

²⁸ “Tote’eh-ye Se-Zel’i-ye Jadid-e Gharb Alayh-e Iran Be Revayat-e Doktor Hassan Rouhani.” [The West’s New Triangular Conspiracy Against Iran According to Dr. Rouhani], *E’temad* (Iran), October 28, 2011. (<http://peace-ipsc.org/fa/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A6%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%B6%D9%84%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7/>)

²⁹ Louis Charbonneau, “Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Weapons Lifeline to Assad,” *Reuters*, March 14, 2013. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/14/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBRE92D05U20130314>)

³⁰ Erika Solomon, “Insight: Syrian Government Guerrilla Fighters Being Sent to Iran for Training,” *Reuters*, April 4, 2013. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/04/us-syria-iran-training-insight-idUSBRE9330DW20130404>)

noted that Iranian flights are using Iraqi air space to bring military aid to Assad.³¹ Without such support, it is unlikely that Assad could sustain the fight.³²

There is no evidence that Rouhani disagrees with his Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards on the importance of advancing Iranian primacy in the region, especially in Syria. Rouhani appears to be in full agreement that Syria is the key battleground, and a critical element of the regional balance of power.

Maintaining significant Iranian influence in Syria and expanding its nuclear weapons program are both strategic priorities for Tehran.

Much like Iran's determination to expand its role within Syria, the expansion of its illicit nuclear weapons program is also a key Iranian strategic priority. The Iranian regime's strategy is to establish facts on the ground in pursuit of an end game, which it can use to further its goal of regional hegemony. Its nuclear policy is predicated on reaching critical nuclear capability, with an industrial-size nuclear program, and undetectable breakout to multiple nuclear weapons. In pursuit of this goal, in violation of multiple UN Security Council resolutions, IAEA demands, and U.S. and international sanctions, it continues to enrich uranium at Natanz and Fordow, install thousands of new, advanced and more efficient centrifuges, engage in suspicious activities with respect to a heavy-water reactor at Arak, and refuses to disclose to the IAEA the military dimensions of its nuclear program.

Iran has publicly identified Syria as vital to its geopolitical interests. Tehran violates U.S. and European sanctions and heads off UN sanctions by relying on the veto power of Russia and China, while relentlessly pursuing its interests through the financing and arming of the Assad regime and an extensive on-the-ground operational support structure and robust proxy network controlled by the IRGC's Quds Force.

In both cases, in Syria and through its nuclear program, Iran is successfully testing the red lines of the United States and the international community.

What we can learn about Rouhani's Syria strategy from examining his nuclear record.

Given the parallels between Iran's Syria and nuclear policies, it is instructive to examine Rouhani's record as Iran's lead negotiator with the EU3 – Britain, France and Germany – from 2003 to 2005. It is a record of deception rather than moderation, and is helpful in assessing whether Rouhani should be trusted to end Tehran's development of its illicit nuclear weapons program, and deliver on an Iranian commitment to end his regime's sizable contribution to the bloodshed in Syria.

³¹ "Iraq Foreign Minister Says Can't Stop Iran Arms flights to Syria," *Haaretz*, July 13, 2013. (<http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/1.535529>)

³² Louis Charbonneau, "Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Weapons Lifeline to Assad," *Reuters*, March 14, 2013. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/14/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBRE92D05U20130314>)

Ahmadinejad, and Iran's most recent nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, were infamous for their bluntness. By contrast, Rouhani has masterfully wielded temperate rhetoric to the same end: the expansion of Iran's nuclear program. In 2004, Rouhani described Iranian nuclear policy as a twin strategy of "confidence-building and...build[ing] up our technical capability," with the goal of "cooperating with Europe" in order to divide Europe from the United States.³³ He further described this approach as key to the development of a key nuclear facility: "While we were talking with the Europeans in Tehran, we were installing equipment in parts of the nuclear conversion facility in Isfahan. By creating a calm environment, we were able to complete the work there."³⁴

Rouhani's media savvy deputy at the Supreme National Security Council, Seyed Hossein Mousavian, described this as the "widen the transatlantic gap" strategy.³⁵ In the third presidential debate of the most recent election, in a discussion on Iran's nuclear program, Rouhani bragged that Iran was able to "import foreign technology from abroad," and stressed that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei guided his nuclear diplomacy.³⁶

In 2008, former Khatami administration spokesman Abdollah Ramezanzadeh described Rouhani's nuclear strategy during a panel debate covered by Iran's Fars News Agency: "During the confidence-building era we entered the nuclear club, and despite the suspension [of uranium enrichment], we imported all the materials needed for our nuclear activities of the country...The solution is to prove to the entire world that we want the power plants for electricity. Afterwards we can proceed with other activities..."³⁷

Ramezanzadeh further elaborated on Iran's strategy: "As long as we were not subjected to sanctions, and during our negotiations we could import technology, we should have negotiated for so long, and benefited from the atmosphere of negotiations to the extent that we could import all the technology needed. The adversary wanted the negotiations to come to a dead end and initiate a new phase. But we wanted to continue negotiations until the U.S. would be gone from the circle of negotiations."³⁸

Ramezanzadeh summed it up this way: "We had one overt policy, which was one of negotiation and confidence building, and a covert policy, which was continuation of the activities...in the field of confidence building, Japan is the most advanced country in the world but Japan can produce a nuclear bomb in less than a week."³⁹

³³ A. Savyon, "Iran's Nuclear Policy Crisis," *The Middle East Media Research Institute*, September 21, 2004. (<http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/1222.htm>)

³⁴ Dr. Chen Kane, "Nuclear Decision-Making in Iran: A Rare Glimpse," *Brandeis University*, May 2006. (<http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB5.pdf>)

³⁵ Sohrab Ahmari, "Chronic Antagonists," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 20, 2012. (<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304022004577514852558385294.html>)

³⁶ "Third Televised Debate of the Presidential Elections in Iran," *Hamshahroi Online*, June 13, 2013. (<http://www.hamshahrionline.ir/details/217658>)

³⁷ "Ramezanzadeh: The Behind the Scenes Policy of the Khatami Administration was the Continuation of Nuclear Activities," *Fars News Agency* (Iran), June 14, 2008. (<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8703250692>)

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

Indeed, it was during the “moderate” presidencies of Rafsanjani and Khatami that Iran moved ahead in planning and development of key components of its nuclear program, including clandestine facilities at Natanz and Arak. Rouhani was secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council during the planning or construction of these key facilities. In the case of the Fordow enrichment site, another clandestine enrichment facility only declared when the Iranians were caught red-handed, there is a dispute between Iran and the IAEA on the timing of the construction of the site. The IAEA has not accepted Iran’s declaration that it started construction of Fordow in 2007. The IAEA alleges that there was evidence of construction between 2002 and 2004, which then resumed in 2006.⁴⁰

In that case, the decision to build Fordow also occurred when Rouhani was still on the Supreme National Security Council. In none of these cases, notwithstanding Rouhani’s claims of transparency with respect to Iran’s nuclear program, did he or any of Iran’s top officials voluntarily disclose the existence of these clandestine facilities as required under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. On the contrary, they hid them from the IAEA.

In supporting the argument for Rouhani’s moderation, much is made of his role in Iran’s decision to temporarily suspend uranium enrichment in 2004, and, even, it is, claimed in temporarily terminating Iran’s clandestine weaponization activities.⁴¹ But it is worth remembering that this decision was not only a diplomatic feint to head off sanctions while importing nuclear technology, and constructing covert facilities. It likely was also inspired by a genuine fear that President George W. Bush would target Tehran after quickly disposing of Saddam and the Iraqi military in 2003.

This suggests that, perhaps, only the credible threat of U.S. military force in support of the Syrian opposition and/or against Iran’s nuclear program could possibly shift the calculus of the Iranian regime.

Testing Rouhani’s Intentions

Rouhani can demonstrate that he is willing to depart from the regime’s policies through a series of concrete steps.

Rouhani has a long career as a regime loyalist who has been a faithful servant to both of Iran’s Supreme Leaders. If Rouhani wants to prove himself as a peaceful, reliable and transparent interlocutor with the international community, Syria presents an opportunity to prove both his willingness and ability to depart from the policies of Khamenei, Suleimani and the IRGC. There are at least seven ways he must do that:

⁴⁰ International Atomic Energy Agency, “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council Resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008), and 1835 (2008) in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” Report by the Director General, 16 November 2009.

<http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2009/gov2009-74.pdf>

⁴¹ Francois Nicoulland, “Rouhani and the Iranian Bomb,” *New York Times*, July 26, 2013.

1) *Cease funding of military assistance and financing to Syria.*

Iran continues to supply Assad with military assistance and financing estimated at \$500 million a month, according to opposition sources.⁴² Iran has also extended a credit line to the Assad regime valued at \$4 billion with the possibility of an additional \$3 billion.⁴³

2) *Cease training of Syrian regular and non-regular forces in Iran.*

The Syrian government is sending members of its irregular militias for guerrilla combat training at a base in Iran. Iran is helping to train at least 50,000 militiamen and aims to increase the force to 100,000.⁴⁴

3) *Remove all IRGC forces from Syria.*

Iran's IRGC Ground Forces and IRGC Quds Force services are advising and assisting the Syrian military in order to preserve Assad's hold on power.⁴⁵ While the Guards Corps and the Quds Forces typically operate separately – with the Guard Corps focusing on internal Iranian affairs and the Quds Forces exerting Iranian influence beyond its borders – both armed wings of Iran appear to be working together in the case of Syria.

IRGC Quds Force Commander, Major General Qassem Suleimani, plays a prominent role in Iran's Syria policy. After his recent defection, former Syrian Prime Minister Riad Hijab said that, "Syria is occupied by the Iranian regime. The person who runs the country is not Bashar al-Assad but Qassem Suleimani, the head of Iranian regime's Quds Force."⁴⁶ The extent of the Quds Force's involvement in Syria became clearer in February 2013 when high-ranking Iranian Brigadier General Hassam Shateri was assassinated in the Damascus countryside while traveling to Beirut, after having traveled to Aleppo.⁴⁷

⁴² "Analysis: By Relying on Iran and Hezbollah, Syria's Assad Risks Irrelevance," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 21, 2013. (<http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Analysis-By-relying-on-Iran-and-Hezbollah-Syrias-Assad-risks-irrelevance-320532>)

⁴³ "Iran offers Syria \$4 bn credit line," *AFP*, May 27, 2013.

(<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gPvIV4RkiZpEZHDcWzk857jj5kkQ?docId=CN.G.7b0df1107dcbdc8f82031bbc1504a6f0.851>)

⁴⁴ Erika Solomon, "Insight: Syrian Government Guerrilla Fighters Being Sent to Iran for Training," *Reuters*, April 4, 2013. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/04/us-syria-iran-training-insight-idUSBRE9330DW20130404>)

⁴⁵ Michael Weiss & Elizabeth O'Bagy, "Why Arming the Rebels Isn't Enough," *The Atlantic*, June 14, 2013. (<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/06/why-arming-the-rebels-isnt-enough/276889/>)

⁴⁶ *Arna News*, February 16, 2013.

(http://arnanews.ir/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=1421:%D9%86%D9%85%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%D9%88%D9%84%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D9%81%D9%82%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%87%DB%8C%D8%AF-)

⁴⁷ "Martyrdom of the Head of the Lebanon Reconstruction Committee by the Zionist Regime's Mercenaries," *ABNA*, February 13, 2013. (<http://abna.co/data.asp?lang=1&id=390561>)

The IRGC Ground Forces are also involved in the mission inside Syria to support the Assad regime. Following the January 2013 release of 48 Iranian nationals kidnapped near Damascus, it was revealed that, among those released, were high-ranking current commanders of the IRGC Ground Forces.⁴⁸

4) *Prohibit the transfer of technology and material to Syria that is used to repress the Syrian people.*

A number of U.S. Department of the Treasury designations in 2012 indicate that Iranian intelligence organizations have been involved in the effort to suppress anti-regime protests throughout Syria. The organizations designated included the Law Enforcement Forces (LEF), the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), and the large defense contractor Iran Electronics Industries (IEI).⁴⁹

5) *Instruct Nasrallah to remove Hezbollah forces from Syria.*

Hezbollah, with assistance from the IRGC Quds Forces, is training government and pro-Assad forces inside Syria,⁵⁰ sending its fighters into Syria to confront the Sunni opposition,⁵¹ and facilitating the passage of Iranian arms shipments to Syria.⁵² Hezbollah militants participate in a number of direct support activities in Syria, including sniper and counter-sniper operations, facility and route protection, joint clearing operations, and direct engagement with opposition forces, often in coordination with Syrian forces and pro-government militias.⁵³

6) *Stop the recruitment of Iraqi Shi'a militias for the Syrian war.*

Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militias, including Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al Haqq, have established close relations with the IRGC Quds Force and are also fighting in Syria in support of Assad. Iraqi Shi'a leaders told *The New York Times*, in October 2012, that Iran assisted in the recruitment, transportation, armament, and payment of Shi'a fighters travelling to Syria from Iraq. According to the report, some Iraqi Shi'a fighters are

⁴⁸ Mohammed Sergie, "Social Media Buzz: Iranian Prisoner Exchange," *Syria Deeply*, January 14, 2013. (www.beta.syriadeeply.org)

⁴⁹ U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Designates Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security for Human Rights Abuses and Support for Terrorism," February 16, 2012. (<http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1424.aspx>)

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Sanctions al-Nusra Front Leaders, Militia Groups in Syria," December 11, 2012. (<http://ipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2012/12/20121211139861.html#axzz2M2qKngyq>)

⁵¹ Jamie Dettmer, "Hezbollah, Jabhat al-Nusra Set for Showdown in Syria," *The Daily Beast*, March 14, 2013. (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/03/14/hezbollah-jabhat-al-nusra-set-for-showdown-in-syria.html>)

⁵² U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Designates Syrian Entity, Others Involved in Arms and Communications Procurement Networks and Identifies Blocked Iranian Aircraft," September 19, 2012. (<http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1714.aspx>)

⁵³ Matthew Levitt, "The Hezbollah Connection in Syria and Iran," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 15, 2013. (<http://www.cfr.org/iran/hezbollah-connection-syria-iran/p30005>)

traveling to Tehran before being flown into Damascus, while others are being transported from Najaf, Iraq into Syria.⁵⁴

7) *Cease Iranian expansionism inside Syria.*

Iran is fighting to preserve its interests in Syria. Arab media outlets have reported recently that Iran is seeking to ethnically alter the landscape of the Middle East by granting Syrian nationality to 750,000 Shiites from throughout the Middle East. The reports also state that Tehran is spending billions of dollars to purchase land in Syria.⁵⁵

Iran's offensive in Syria demonstrates that Tehran will use force, diplomacy, economics, and covert action to advance its interest, even if it's at the level of a "Plan B" – to preserve what my FDD colleague Tony Badran has called an Iranian-backed "Alawistan" enclave in Western Syria, from the Alawite heartland to Damascus via Homs, adjoined to Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁵⁶

These are seven steps that Rouhani can take to demonstrate that he is a different kind of Iranian leader. But stopping the massacre of Syrian Muslim and Christian women and children should not be rewarded with sanctions relief or any other concession. It should be the definition of moderation.

U.S. Policy Options

U.S. policy options must be flexible enough with the new Iranian government to take advantage of diplomatic openings but sufficiently hardheaded to avoid falling into the traps set by Iran's Supreme Leader and his new president.

Rouhani's record on Syria reveals a hardliner who is committed to the regime's Syria policy. However, he also is a sophisticated communicator and may end up being a godsend for the Supreme Leader, who can now offer up a more soft-spoken, cosmopolitan, and diplomatic president. Rouhani's task will be to convince the West to ease sanctions, limit its involvement in the Syria conflict, and not resort to military force against Iran's nuclear weapons program, even while Khamenei is unprepared to fundamentally change his Syria policy or relinquish his nuclear program.

The reality is that Rouhani is only the most moderate of the eight hardline candidates who were hand selected by Khamenei to run in Iran's recent election. And even if he

⁵⁴ Yasir Ghazi & Tim Arango, "Iraqi Sects Join Battle in Syria on Both Sides," *The New York Times*, October 27, 2012. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/world/middleeast/influx-of-iraqi-shiites-tosyria-widens-wars-scope.htm>).

⁵⁵ Michael Young, "Is Iran Altering Syria's Sectarian Map?" *The Daily Star Lebanon*, July 18, 2013. (<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Columnist/2013/Jul-18/224071-is-iran-altering-syrias-sectarian-map.ashx#axzz2ZUoVI0RK>)

⁵⁶ Tony Badran, "Alawistan," *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2012. <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/07/27/alawistan>

truly were committed to a change in Iran's Syria policy or to nuclear reconciliation, Rouhani, like Ahmadinejad, lacks the power to alter Iran's trajectory in these two foreign policy areas, which are strategic priorities for the regime. Khamenei remains in charge of both Iran's Syria and nuclear policies.

U.S. policy must be based on tangible action not political rhetoric. While it is reasonable to test the intentions of Rouhani and his ability to influence Khamenei and the IRGC, U.S. policymakers must be cautious of two opportunities for Rouhani to engage in strategic deceit while advancing Iran's interests: The proposed "Geneva II" conference on Syria and the next round of diplomatic talks with the P5+1. In both cases, Khamenei will likely allow Rouhani to engage in negotiations. If Rouhani starts sounding too conciliatory, Khamenei will blame his new president for selling out Iran's interests.

But he also could allow Rouhani to rope-a-dope the international community by offering a deal on both Syria and Iran's nuclear program designed to undercut international pressure. Tehran may try again to persuade the P5+1 to tie Syria and Iran's nuclear program together as a combined file in the diplomatic negotiations.⁵⁷ This ploy always must be rejected; it is an attempt to expand the scope of the P5+1 negotiations over its nuclear program so that it can trade Syrian concessions in exchange for relief on sanctions tied to its nuclear program. It could also be an Iranian attempt to offer nuclear concessions in exchange for sanctions relief, linked to an agreement by the Western powers to recognize Iranian hegemony in Syria and elsewhere in region.

Offers on Syria and on its nuclear program, if presented by Rouhani as a step toward "reconciliation and peace," may be enough to tie up the West for sufficient time for Tehran to support a complete, or partial, victory by Assad that, at a minimum, would set up an Iranian-backed enclave in Syria – "Alawistan"⁵⁸ – on Iranian terms; maintain territorial contiguity with Hezbollah in Lebanon; protect its interests through a network of reliable proxies even in the case of a de facto partition of Syria; undermine international support for sanctions; get Iranian oil flowing again; stabilize the Iranian economy; and, even help Rouhani deliver on his election promises. But because the stakes are so high at this critical time, U.S. policymakers need to be wary of any offers that do not sufficiently arrest Iran's influence in Syria or its nuclear weapons development.

Iran's new president will negotiate to widen the gap between the members of the U.N. Security Council, and other interested countries, on both Syria and Iran's nuclear program. He will remain focused on objectives that he, Khamenei, Rafsanjani, Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and the Revolutionary Guards have been committed to for years:

⁵⁷ Helene Cooper and Mark Landler, "U.S. Officials Say Iran Has Agreed to Nuclear Talks," *New York Times*, October 20, 2012. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/world/iran-said-ready-to-talk-to-us-about-nuclear-program.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>)

⁵⁸ Tony Badran, "Alawistan," *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2012. (<http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/07/27/alawistan>)

(1) Maintaining Iran's presence in Syria as a vital strategic area of influence, either through Assad, or through a new pliant Syrian leader, backed by Hezbollah, the Quds Force and other Iranian-backed militias; and,

(2) Playing for time in order to reach an industrial-size nuclear weapons capacity and a nuclear breakout, which will allow Iran, without detection, to produce enough weapons-grade uranium or separated plutonium for one or more bombs.

To strengthen the U.S. policy options on both the positions on Syria and Iran's nuclear program, the Obama administration should:

1. Resist pressure to broaden the P5+1 diplomatic negotiations over Iran's nuclear program to include Syria, or any other disputed issue.

2. Massively intensify sanctions pressure on Iran to enhance its political leverage. It is premature to be offering meaningful sanctions relief or any other concessions, including on Syria, to Iran before Tehran has satisfied all of its nuclear obligations under international law.

3. Massively intensify sanctions pressure on any person assisting the Assad regime, Iran, Hezbollah, or Iranian-backed militias in circumventing U.S. sanctions, while also imposing sanctions on any person providing support to extremist Sunni elements in Syria. Accelerate the designation of extremist elements on both sides of the Syria conflict and sanctions persons in Russia, Qatar, Turkey and elsewhere supporting these designated entities.

4. Enhance the credibility of military force against Iran's nuclear program and against the Iranian Quds Force, Hezbollah, and Iranian-backed militias. Selective and targeted U.S. strikes against Iranian-backed assets in Syria, similar to what Israel has reportedly undertaken, or through carefully vetted U.S. proxies, will send a signal of increased American resolve and enhance Washington's negotiating leverage on both the Syrian and nuclear tracks.

5. Avoid a negotiated settlement, at a Geneva II conference or during the P5+1 nuclear talks, that allows Iran to retain a "critical capability" on either the Syrian and nuclear tracks. It will be tempting to make concessions on Iranian demands that are presented by Tehran as non-negotiable (for example, some type of international recognition of Iranian control, directly or indirectly, of "Alawistan" territories at a peace conference, or Iranian demands for the P5+1 to concede a "right of enrichment" or retain domestic enrichment). Despite the urgency of resolving the Syria crisis and rolling-back Iran's nuclear program, a "bad deal" is worse than no deal. It will only embolden the regime, undercut the reliability of American leadership in the region, and reduce Washington's leverage when it invariably has to address the harmful results of these agreements.

6. Resist the political pressure to "sweeten the deal" on the assumption that this will strengthen Rouhani's "moderate" position in the Iranian political structure. We should

not be negotiating with ourselves. Rouhani must be judged by the results he delivers, not the political rhetoric he espouses. If he is a moderate, with the requisite influence inside the regime, he must demonstrate that he is a different Iranian leader by taking the concrete steps outlined above to decrease Iranian involvement in the Syrian war. If he is a moderate, he must agree to meet all of Iran's nuclear obligations as outlined in multiple UN Security Council and IAEA board of governors' resolutions. The nuclear file must remain the U.S. priority: If Iran already feels emboldened to act with relative freedom in pursuit of its interests in Syria, its ability to act with impunity once it has a nuclear weapons capability will be catastrophic for the region and U.S. national security.

Conclusion

Iran's Syria policy and nuclear policies are two sides of the same coin and essential strategic elements of Iran's drive for regional hegemony. Iran does not view these two policies separately; neither should the United States. But Washington should resist all efforts by Tehran to combine these two files in any diplomatic talks and leverage one against the other in trading concessions.

Washington should remain skeptical of the intentions and influence of Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani. His record is not encouraging on either the Syria or nuclear track. Mr. Rouhani is a loyalist of Iran's Supreme Leader and a master of diplomatic deceit and doesn't appear to be the elusive moderate who will get the United States any closer to rolling back Iranian influence in Syria, or stopping Iran's nuclear drive. Syria and nuclear policy remain in the hands of the Supreme Leader who has shown no willingness to compromise.

Washington should test the new Iranian president by focusing on results not rhetoric. The Obama administration must look for signs of diplomatic opportunity but remain deeply cautious that the Iranian election has changed anything with respect to Tehran's Syria or nuclear policies. Today, Washington's leverage on both files is waning as the trajectories of the Syrian conflict and of Iran's nuclear program continue to beat Western economic and political pressure. The perception is that Iran is playing to win while the United States is playing not to lose. This makes a diplomatic resolution in America's favor increasingly remote on both files.

Only massively intensified pressure – through sanctions, aggressive diplomacy, and the credible threat (and selective application) of force, either directly or through the support of American proxies – can help the U.S. reverse the strategic gains that Tehran has made in both Syria and on its nuclear program. Only then can Washington possibly convert enhanced leverage into a negotiated settlement that protects the security interests of America and its Middle Eastern allies.

On behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today.