

# Hudson Institute

Prepared statement by

**Michael Doran**

*Senior Fellow*

*Hudson Institute*

Before the

United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

*Wednesday, December 3, 2014*

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me today to speak on the next steps to achieve a comprehensive deal in the nuclear negotiations with Iran. Please permit me to focus my remarks on the perceptions of America's Middle Eastern allies—Israel, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf sheikhdoms, Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan.

It goes without saying that no two countries are exactly the same, and that within each country there are significant differences of opinion. Nevertheless, when one speaks to elites across the Middle East one encounters a prevailing climate of skepticism regarding the nuclear negotiations. It is my intention today to discuss the sources of that skepticism and to analyze its impact on America's strategic goals.

The tale that our allies tell about the thaw in relations between the United States and Iran is markedly different from the tale that the Obama administration itself is telling. The administration begins its story by pointing to a change of heart in Tehran—to the supposed decision by the government of Hassan Rouhani to guide Iran toward reconciliation with the international community.



**Hudson Institute**  
1015 15th Street, N.W.  
Sixth Floor  
Washington, DC 20005

P: 202.974.2400  
F: 202.974.2410  
info@hudson.org  
hudson.org

Our allies, by contrast, see no convincing proof that Tehran is changing course. What they see, instead, is a strategic shift in Washington. Their account of the American-Iranian thaw begins with President Obama's decision, taken while he was still Senator Obama, to end wars. That goal raised an obvious question: In the absence of American troops, what new arrangements on the ground would safeguard American interests? At some point, our allies believe, the president decided in favor of a concert system, a club of powers that would band together to stabilize the region. But in sharp contrast with his predecessors, President Obama conceived of that club as including Iran.

While one can argue about whether the president truly entertains such a vision, there is no disputing the fact that many of our closest allies are utterly convinced of this fact. They perceive the United States to be in a silent partnership with Iran already, and to be working daily for closer relations with it.

This is no fleeting impression. It is a solid body of opinion, based on close observation and analysis, which began to take clear shape over two years ago, in 2012, against the backdrop of the conflict in Syria. When Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah, intervened directly to prop up the regime of Bashar al-Assad, a number of America's closest friends came to Washington and beseeched the president to organize a counter response. The request forced President Obama to choose between two rival visions of the American role in the Middle East. Was the United States dedicated to containing Iran, or to arriving at a modus vivendi with it? He chose the latter path.

At that time, it was not clear whether President Obama was consciously choosing in favor of Iran, or simply seeking to avoid a costly and uncertain military adventure. But his decision, regardless of his motivations, had the effect of giving Iran a free hand in Syria. From the

perspective of our allies, this was a matter of great consequence, because Syria, to them, was more than just a particularly brutal civil war. It was the key battleground in a struggle for a new regional order. If only inadvertently, the president had voted in favor of an Iranian regional ascendancy.

Over the course of the following year, however, our allies came to the conclusion that President Obama's bias in favor of Iran was by no means accidental. The key event that generated this perception was the president's decision, in September 2013, to seek congressional authorization for strikes against the Assad regime. This deference to Capitol Hill was read, in the Middle East, as a transparent decision *not* to strike. At the time, stories began to circulate in the Middle East regarding a secret bilateral negotiating channel between Tehran and Washington. Subsequently, those stories turned out to be true. From the point of view of our allies, it makes little difference whether the channel was used to discuss Syria in any meaningful way. Its mere existence sent a signal of broad strategic intent.

As our allies were still absorbing the meaning of that signal, the administration brokered the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) on the Iranian nuclear question. While many in Washington interpreted the JPOA as a sign that the Rouhani government was making a good faith effort to bring Iran into compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty, America's Middle Eastern allies were more inclined to see it as a capitulation by the United States. In their view, the Obama administration was retreating from long-held positions without receiving reciprocal concessions from the Iranians. In short, the JPOA became another sign of American retreat.

Since the signing of the JPOA, five major trends in American policy have deepened the perception of a silent partnership with Iran—a perception that is now set in stone.

First, our allies perceive increased coordination, at the diplomatic level and in military operations, between the United States and Iran and Syria. When Secretary of State Kerry testified before this committee he explicitly denied such coordination. He preferred instead to speak in terms of “de-confliction.” This euphemism, however, is hardly influencing perceptions in the Middle East. Just two days ago, the regional press noted that the Iranian air force was carrying out sorties in Iraq against ISIS. The Iranians, the press noted, could not have conducted operations in such close proximity to the Americans without significant levels of coordination between the two.

Second, this increased cooperation has not produced any change in the malign Iranian policies that, historically, have deeply threatened America’s allies. To name just a few of those policies, Tehran continues to support Palestinian terrorist organizations, to build up Shiite militias in Iraq, to empower the worst elements of Bashar al-Assad’s murder machine, and to supply Hezbollah with missiles capable of striking all major population centers in Israel. In years past, policies of this sort provoked a counter reaction from the United States. Now, however, they barely elicit a peep from Washington.

Third, our allies have noted the continued American refusal to build up the Syrian opposition in ways that might threaten the Assad regime. They read that refusal as proof that the president regards Syria as an Iranian sphere of interest.

Fourth, the rhetoric of the administration is frequently hostile to traditional friends. When Vice President Biden, at a recent talk at Harvard, stated that “our allies are the problem,” and when a senior official in the White House denigrated the Israeli Prime Minister in crude terms, they were merely airing publicly viewpoints that administration officials have been sharing privately for at least a year.

Fifth and not least, the conduct of the United States in the nuclear negotiations has confirmed our allies' perception that American resolve is flagging. When the Obama administration first agreed to the JPOA's terms, it explained the renunciation of the demand for zero enrichment as a way of allowing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to save face. All he needed, so the argument went, was a symbolic level of enrichment. It soon became clear, however, that those who had developed this assessment had failed to consult the man himself. When Khamenei made clear his refusal to dismantle even a single centrifuge, the administration again retreated. As a result, our allies are now asking if it is the Americans, and not the Iranians, who are in need of a face-saving agreement.

Do the bitter assessments of our allies really matter? Indeed they do. Their alarm is worrying for a whole host of reasons, but two are particularly noteworthy. First, our allies' alienation from the president's regional strategy is undermining his ability to build an effective coalition against ISIS. It is a hard fact of life that we cannot win this conflict without developing Sunni allies. On the ground we need Sunni troops, trusted by the local population, who are capable of holding the cities and towns from which we will drive ISIS. In the region more broadly, we need a committed coalition of Sunni states. However, so long as we are aligned with Iran and its allies, who have a well-deserved reputation for sectarian murder, we will fail to attract Sunnis to our banner.

The Turkish case is instructive. In sharp contrast to Saudi Arabia and Israel, Turkey does not regard Iran as an existential threat. Nevertheless, the Turkish government is deeply committed to toppling the Assad regime, which it correctly identifies as the single most destabilizing force in Syria. Thus, even with respect to Turkey, the Obama administration's de-

facto recognition of an Iranian sphere of interest is undermining its goal of building an effective anti-ISIS coalition.

The second reason for caring about our allies' concerns relates directly to the nuclear question. It is a grave mistake to assume that the Iranian position in the nuclear negotiations is disconnected from everything else that is happening in the Middle East. The demoralization of our allies emboldens Ali Khamenei. It is just as clear to him as it is to the Saudis and the Israelis that the Obama administration has prioritized the conflict with ISIS over the containment of Iran. The five trends in American policy that deeply unsettle our allies have the effect of providing the Iranian leader with reassurance. They indicate, among other things, that his intransigence is unlikely to provoke President Obama into ratcheting up economic sanctions, let alone to contemplate military action.

With the threat of economic pressure diminished and the military option all but nonexistent, American regional strategy incentivizes Iran to hold out for more concessions. In doing so, that strategy has made it nearly impossible to imagine a satisfactory comprehensive agreement—one that includes restrictions on ballistic missiles and warheads, a full disclosure by Iran of the possible military dimensions of its program, and an effective monitoring regime. If the administration does not take steps immediately to reconstitute the leverage that it held over Iran just a year ago, then we can be assured that the next round of negotiations will result in the further erosion of the American position.

The first step toward regaining that leverage is for the President to sign a new sanctions bill that will demonstrate to the Iranians, and to our allies in the region, that our patience is not endless. The second step is to dispel our allies' perception of a silent partnership with Iran. That

step begins with, but is by no means limited to, building up an effective opposition to the Assad regime in Syria.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify. It is an honor to speak before this committee on an issue of such importance.