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“Iran in the Western Hemisphere”
Rep. Gary L. Ackerman, Chairman
House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia

I want to thank my friend Mr. Engel for organizing today’s trilateral hearing on Iran’s activities in the Western Hemisphere. I don’t think it takes a lot of convincing to make the case that Tehran’s goals in our part of world are not benign. The ayatollahs’ foreign policy has always been simple: a good offense is the best defense.

We see this vividly in the Middle East, where Iran has built up Hezbollah and Hamas to create chaos and terror, and most importantly to drive events away from Iran and to create deterrence. Likewise in Iraq, where Iran has stoked the fires of sectarianism with arms, money and political support, all in the hope of keeping Iraq prostrate. Iran’s strategy in Afghanistan is much the same, with Iranian military aid even going to the Shia-hating Taliban, all in an effort to prevent the United States and our allies from bringing order and stability to Afghanistan.

In each case, Iran seeks to maximize its gains by betting on insurgents, terrorists and militants, hoping that their allies will either take over the body politic, or by murder and intimidation, seize an important or even a dominant position in the political system over the long term. What should worry all of us is Iran’s intentions to establish the same capabilities in this hemisphere.

It’s a “heads I win, tails you lose” strategy. And it’s worked remarkably well for a remarkably low cost. Every year, the State Department report on state sponsors of terrorism describes in remarkable detail the extent of Iran’s activities to create chaos, turmoil and crisis around the world. Every year since 1979, Iran makes threats, supports subversion, and dispenses military assistance to terrorists at war with their own or other governments. And every year, the international community does absolutely nothing whatsoever.

As a major oil producer in a volatile region, the world has decided to minimize the significance of Iranian misbehavior. While Israel is routinely condemned in the United Nations for defending itself against aggression and terror, Iran, which is actively making trouble, or developing or sustaining the ability to do so in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Kuwait, Bahrain, Yemen and Morocco, faces not a single word of censure. As a feat of diplomacy, it's really quite remarkable. When considered in light of Iran's steady march toward acquiring nuclear capabilities, which is in clear contravention of both Iran's NPT obligations and three mandates from the UN Security Council, Iran's success in avoiding punishment is altogether astonishing.

Iran has gone untouched for two reasons. First, by supporting Hamas and Hezbollah, Tehran has effectively co-opted the Palestinian cause which, due to the salience of the issue and the political weakness of the Arab states, effectively neuters the entire Arab League. And with the Arabs goes the Organization of the Islamic Conference. It's not that states with strong ties to the United States, like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Indonesia or Pakistan think Iran is undeserving of censure. The governments of each of these countries are well aware that Iran is the greatest threat to both peace and stability in the Middle East, and to the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. The problem is that the governments of every one of these countries are absolutely petrified of the price they would pay in public opinion if they acknowledged these convictions publicly.

Second, Iran has, tapped effectively into the lingering hostility born of the anti-colonial struggles of the last century. Over time, appeals to fight against the United States and the West may have less resonance in a world where colonial domination is more of an abstraction than a memory. But in the present, anti-colonialism still delivers the goods diplomatically for Iran, and has given Iran entrée into the Western Hemisphere. The fact that Iran is seeking hegemony over the Middle East, and that in June it effectively went to war against its own people, has apparently done nothing to diminish Iran's credibility with some of the developing nations in this part of the world.

We are not going to be able to constrain Iran until we understand the full scope of its ambitions, and begin to work in a truly comprehensive manner to constrain, counter and defeat those ambitions. Today's hearing on Iran's activities in the Western Hemisphere is thus extremely important.

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