

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

January 31, 2007

Understanding the Iran Crisis

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Mr. Chairman, Representative Ros-Lehtinen, Members of the Committee, I am honored to be asked to testify before you today on this important issue. By way of identification, I am currently Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Future Security Strategies at Hudson Institute in Washington working principally on trying to understand the character of emerging security landscapes and the challenges and opportunities they might offer to U.S. security planning. For the last 30 years, I have consulted on long-range security issues for many agencies of our government, as well as for foreign governments and private sector clients. From 1987-93, I was Director of Radio Liberty in Munich, Germany, a period that encompassed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. I was trained as a Central Asianist, hence my abiding interest in Iran and its environment. In my short testimony today, I shall endeavor to draw on each of these perspectives.

Nuclear Iran and International Security

From my perspective as someone who has spent a great deal of my professional life trying to understand how nuclear weapons might figure in the future strategies of states that do not now possess them, I have concluded, Mr. Chairman, that under no circumstances should Iran be allowed to acquire them. A nuclear Iran can neither be “managed,” as many of our European allies believe, nor deterred in any traditional sense, as advocates of stronger non-proliferation treaties hope will be the case.

Iran is fast building its position as the Middle East’s political and military hegemon, a position that will be largely unchallengeable once it acquires nuclear weapons. A nuclear Iran will change all of the critical strategic dynamics of this volatile region in ways that threaten the interests of virtually everyone else. The outlines of some of these negative trends are already visible, as other actors adjust their strategies to accommodate what increasingly appears to be the emerging reality of an unpredictable, unstable nuclear power. It is important to understand where we are today with respect to a nuclear Iran. Tehran needn’t test a device to shift these dangerous dynamics into high gear; that is already happening. By the time Iran tests, the landscape will have changed dramatically because everyone will have seen it coming.

The opportunities nuclear weapons will afford Iran far exceed the prospect of using them to win a military conflict. Nuclear weapons will empower strategies of

coercion, intimidation and denial that go far beyond purely military considerations. Acquiring the bomb as an icon of state power will enhance the legitimacy of Iran's mullahs and make it harder for disgruntled Iranians to oust them. With nuclear weapons, Iran will have gained the ability to deter any direct American threats, as well as the leverage to keep the U.S. at a distance and to discourage it from helping Iran's regional opponents. Would the U.S. be in Iraq if Saddam had had a few nuclear weapons and the ability to deliver them on target to much of Europe and all of Israel? Would it even have gone to war in 1991 to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi aggression? Unlikely. Yet Iran is rapidly acquiring just such a capability. If it succeeds, a relatively small nuclear outcast will be able to deter a mature nuclear power. Iran will become a billboard advertising nuclear weapons as the logical asymmetric weapon of choice for nations that wish to confront the United States.

Mr. Chairman, it should surprise no one that quiet discussions have already begun in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and elsewhere in the Middle East about the desirability of developing national nuclear capabilities to blunt Iran's anticipated advantage and offset the perceived decline in America's protective power. I believe that this is just the beginning. Proliferation across Eurasia will be broad and swift, creating nightmarish challenges. The diffusion of nuclear know-how is on the verge of becoming impossible to impede. Just yesterday, I heard former senator Sam Nunn describe the chances of success of his Nuclear Threat Initiative, which seeks to put barriers in the pathway of proliferation, as only a three on a scale of ten, and getting worse. Non-proliferation treaties, never effective in blocking the ambitions of rogues like Iran and North Korea, will be meaningless. Intentional proliferation to state and non-state actors is virtually certain, as newly capable states seek to empower their friends and sympathizers. Iran, with its well known support of Hezbollah, is a particularly good candidate to proliferate nuclear capabilities beyond the control of any state as a way to extend the coercive reach of its own nuclear politics.

In the world of nuclear Iran, arsenals will be small, which sounds reassuring, but in fact it heightens the dangers and risk. New players, including Iran, with just a few weapons will be especially dangerous. Cold War deterrence was based on the belief that an initial strike by an attacker could not destroy all of an opponent's nuclear weapons, leaving the adversary with the capacity to strike back in a devastating retaliatory blow. Because it is likely to appear easier to destroy them in a single blow, small arsenals will increase the incentive to strike first in a crisis.

Some of the new nuclear actors will be less interested in deterrence than in using nuclear weapons to annihilate their enemies. Iran's leadership has spoken of its willingness—in their words—to “martyr” the entire Iranian nation, and it has even expressed the desirability of doing so as a way to accelerate an inevitable, apocalyptic collision between Islam and the West that will result in Islam's final worldwide triumph.

Ahmadinejad is the product of the most reactionary parts of Iran's clerical regime: the support structures in security, intelligence and paramilitary vigilante *baseej* forces and their hardline Islamic mentors. This group of zealots and their views are more extreme in

virtually all aspects than those of the regime's house clerics. They see themselves as the true guardians of Ayatollah Khomeini's legacy, often criticizing the clerics for not being radical enough in pursuing Islamic revolution. Their ideological godfather is the ultra-conservative Ayatollah Mesba-e Yazdi—better known as “Professor Crocodile” to Iranians—whose teachings converge with the anti-Western conspiracy theories of Ahmad Fardid, a Persian follower of Nazi sympathizer Martin Heidegger. Together they espouse an ideological cocktail whose main ingredients are a pathological hatred of the West and its civilization and the inevitability of an apocalyptic collision between Islam and the West that will result in Islam's triumph worldwide.

This is not an original interpretation of what Islam requires of its followers, but Ahmadinejad and the zealots who support him have given it a novel and disturbing twist. According to them, the inevitable clash between Islam and the West will accelerate the reappearance of the Hidden Imam, also known as Imam Mahdi, the messianic core of Shiite Islam. According to Shia doctrine, the messiah will return to lead the forces of righteousness in a final cosmic battle against evil shortly before Judgement Day and the end of history. Ahmadinejad thus urges the Iranian people to bring the Hidden Imam's reappearance closer through “the art of martyrdom.” And “A nation with martyrdom knows no captivity,” he recently exhorted his followers. Moreover, he insists, anyone who resists this principle, “undermines the foundation of our eternity.” How soon can the Hidden Imam appear? Ahmadinejad has said that it is possible in only two years.

Is Iran's quest for nuclear weapons connected to Ahmadinejad and his followers' plans for martyring the Iranian nation to speed the return of the Hidden Imam? As if to provide an answer to this question, a disciple of Professor Crocodile recently issued a fatwa for the use of nuclear weapons by Muslims on the basis of shari'a, in what regime critics have characterized as a new effort by the hardliners to “prepare the religious grounds for use of these weapons.” We should be clear, Mr. Chairman, that we have no idea how to deter ideological actors who may seek to annihilate others and be annihilated, gloriously, in return.

This is the world Iran is dragging us into. French president Jacques Chirac clearly had Iran in mind when, uncharacteristically, he recently threatened devastating retaliation by France's nuclear forces for any nuclear strike on France. His message could not have been blunter: Iran will indeed be martyred if it takes this direction. This is a message the Iranian people need to hear, alerting them that Ahmadinejad and his confederates may be taking Iranians down a road most wish not to travel. But are they getting this message?

If we wish to avoid having to confront Iran militarily at some point in the foreseeable future, we need to unleash other influences and instruments that can help shape Iran's emerging landscape in ways that give Iranians a chance to step back, rethink their current trajectories, constrain the radicals among them, and recalibrate their strategies in the direction of rejoining the world community. I strongly believe that this is possible by going directly to Iran's people, especially its young educated men and women, its intellectuals, its labor unions and business community, and other key agents of change. Yet while these diverse groups may share visions of pushing the ruling

mullahs into retirement, to date little critical mass has developed amongst them that might eventually coalesce to make this happen.

During the Cold War, we faced similar obstacles in Eastern Europe and the USSR, where unconventional ideas and intense debate were considered offenses against the state. Into this void of ideas, we directed America's powerful international broadcasting stations, now acknowledged by nearly everyone as perhaps the most important influence in shaping and accelerating change in the East. Iran is easily as resonant a milieu for idea-induced change as, say, Poland or Russia, and perhaps more so, but unfortunately both the war of ideas and the instruments that gave them life have been largely ignored by this administration. There is no better illustration of this neglect than America's principal broadcast service to Iran, Radio Farda, which the Broadcasting Board of Governors describes as "a youth-oriented 24/7 Persian-language radio service that broadcasts political, social, and economic news, information, public affairs, and music to Iran."

Unfortunately, the youth orientation of Radio Farda means that broadcasts are mostly music. Media consultant Bert Kleinman, the architect of musical Radio Farda, insists in a recent AP story that Iran's large under-30 demographic offers the best opportunity for fomenting change in Iran. Kleinman notes that if you want to reach young people anywhere in the world, "this is how you do it." This will come as a surprise to the critically important youth of Poland under Communism in the 1960s and 1970s, a youth bubble that was larger in fact than Iran's today. Radio Free Europe gave them a little music, but it also enlivened their critical thinking with analysis and context—history, culture, religion, economics, law, human rights, labor, and cross-reporting from many perspectives—mostly missing from today's Radio Farda broadcasts. Radio Liberty's broadcasts to the former USSR never used music yet boasted a substantial youth audience.

Radio Farda's confusion is elementary. Unfortunately, the same confusion increasingly infects most of our broadcast efforts throughout the world. The confusion is between public diplomacy—which features telling America's story and advocating for America's positions—and strategic communications, which is very different. The VOA, the official voice of the U.S. Government, has always been part of the public diplomacy architecture, but the Radio Frees, better known as "surrogate" radio stations, have not. Their mission is fundamentally different. While public diplomacy is all about "us," the surrogate Radios are all about "them." The surrogate radios were successful during the Cold War because they were less concerned with how or why people dislike us or with advocating for America than in spurring intelligent listeners to think about the costs to their nation of runaway ideologies and isolation from critical globalizing trends. They were intended to stir debate within societies like Iran in ways that weaken the ability of oppressive regimes to monopolize information and ideas and, hence, power.

What eventually became Radio Farda was created for exactly this purpose. In the un-adopted Radio Free Iran Act of 1995, Congress called for additional broadcasts to further "the open communication of accurate information and ideas about Iran to the

people of Iran.” The language of the bill is crystal clear in its intent to create a new “surrogate” broadcast entity to compliment existing broadcasts to Iran from the VOA. In 1998 Congress appropriated \$4 million for a Radio Free Iran, to be run by RFE/RL, the nation’s premier “surrogate” broadcaster. At no point did the Congress envision or approve creating another public diplomacy instrument that focused on America and pumped out popular music.

In the beginning, this worked well. Radio Free Iran, renamed Radio Azadi, was run by RFE/RL as a real surrogate station until 2002. It was an effective operation. By 2002, after only four years of operation, Azadi had become the most popular foreign broadcaster to Iran, outpacing the better-known BBC and VOA in the size of its elite audience. (Anecdotal evidence suggests that even current Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was a regular listener—reminiscent of the success of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty in drawing in most of the critical elites in their broadcast areas during the Cold War.) But in 2002, the station was abruptly morphed into Radio Farda, and the programming changes that transformed it from the successful surrogate service aimed at critical elites and the populations that support them, as Congress had envisioned, to an airy music station aimed at kids took place.

Today, what passes for broadcast strategy at Radio Farda features an indiscriminant audience-maximizing formula that measures success by the number of listeners who tune in, not by the quality of those listeners or by the critical positions of influence and authority they occupy. If that metric had been applied to Radio Liberty, it would have been abolished before it came into its own in the 1970s, becoming a powerful instrument of change. This dumbing down respects the needs and intelligence of neither the traditional change agents nor critical younger audiences, especially Iran’s powerful student movement. Apparently distrustful that Iranians can handle anything but “news products,” many of which they already receive from other sources—and only if enticed to listen with feel-good music—Radio Farda offers little other substantive programming.

In Radio Farda’s defense, its manager insists in the AP story I cited earlier that Iranians will tune Radio Farda out if it ceases to be “believable.” Credibility is indeed the currency of strategic communications, which is why substituting music for powerful ideas is so confused. Any sentient Iranian can see that it’s the music that lacks credibility, that it’s a trick, a gimmick. They also see that filling up the airwaves with Britney Spears and Shania Twain says that America has no ideas of value and that we don’t trust Iranian listeners to distinguish intelligent debate from pop culture pap. What else could they conclude but the obvious: America is just trying to make us like them, it’s public diplomacy all over again. A far better and tested strategy would be to level with them, and help them level with each other.

The notion that we must not offend Radio Farda’s Iranian listeners throws that station’s reason for existing into question. As you know better than most, Mr. Chairman, while stressing balance, the Radios have never been neutral. To the contrary, they were created to shape political landscapes in ways that favor our desired outcomes, and our listeners have always known it. Calling for the overthrow of any regime has never been

permitted by broadcast guidelines, and shouldn't be. But as the Cold War experience demonstrated beyond question, the Radios can contribute momentum towards political change by stimulating and encouraging the right audience.

During the Cold War, Russians, Poles, Czechs, Azerbaijanis, Uzbeks and many others tuned in to RFE/RL to receive ideas they hungered for and to hear support for unpopular, often dangerous, platforms for change. These audiences started small, grew large, and eventually encompassed most critical elites. Iran, with a strong cohort of educated young people, including the most educated women in the Middle East, is probably a more resonant milieu than Russia ever was. Yet, while the Russians received serious analysis, commentary, context—all from within their society—and the views of others elsewhere in the world grappling with similar challenges, Iranians get Madonna.

Mr. Chairman, shielding Iranians with pop music from a reality they already understand is a losing strategy. Moreover, Radio Farda should not function simply as another news organization in an increasingly globalized information universe. Indeed, Iran, like most of the Middle East, is awash in news from hundreds of sources. What Iranians lack is internally generated discussion and debate on what the news means and how they should incorporate that knowledge into their view of themselves and the world.

This approach may draw a smaller audience, at least in the beginning, but it will be an audience that counts for something.

Mr. Chairman, public diplomacy—that is, telling America's story and emphasizing American values—will not lure Iran back from the nuclear threshold. Strategic broadcasting by the Radios—that is, seeding Iran with ideas from within Iran and stimulating debate—on the airwaves, on the Internet, and on emerging technologies—is a far more powerful and proven weapon. My recommendation, Mr. Chairman, is simple. Radio Farda should scrub its broadcasting of music and replace it with serious programming. I can't stress this strongly enough that we know how to organize and implement such a strategy. We have done it before, and we are good at it. But we are not doing it now. Although not the subject of this hearing, I recommend taking a similar hard look at the extremely expensive BBG Arabic-language investments Al Hurra TV and Radio Sawa.

The knowledge and the art of strategic communications is being lost, nearly all its traditional instruments, including Radio Farda, are currently degraded, their successful strategies have been polluted and discarded, and their missions are badly garbled. Added to this, we are in late innings with Iran. It is with a sense of some urgency, therefore, that I urge you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, to make fixing America's strategic communications a top priority.