

# Safeguarding Israel's Security in a Volatile Region

Prepared statement by

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## Hearing on "Safeguarding Israel's Security in a Volatile Region"

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee once again. The subject of this hearing is an important and timely one.

The volatility of the Middle East has been evident in the last two years and indeed in the last two weeks. Look at the scene for a moment from the Israeli perspective:

- To the north, Syria is in the midst of a civil war and foreign jihadi forces have arrived from all over the Islamic world. Even when Assad falls, no one can really say what they will do: go home, or stay and seek new targets such as Israel. And the chaos in Syria can easily infect Lebanon, where there is already violence connected to the Syrian conflict.
- To the south, Egypt's fate is uncertain. The Muslim Brotherhood government failed to protect the U.S. Embassy from attack and its new president has never apologized for that attack. Egypt's willingness to restore order in the Sinai and prevent terrorist attacks on Israel from there is much in doubt. According to *The Times of Israel*, just last Friday "the headquarters of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in the Sinai was attacked. Dozens of gunmen, in some 50 vehicles, surrounded

the base and then 60-70 of them burst in, storming into the base amid heavy gunfire.” And of course, Hamas remains in control of Gaza.

- To the east there is unrest, including frequent and occasionally violent demonstrations in both the West Bank and Jordan.
- Even more dangerously, Iran moves closer and closer to a nuclear weapons capability. It continues to design warheads, improve its missiles, and spin centrifuges, adding every month to its store of enriched uranium—some of it enriched to 20 percent or higher. The P5+1 negotiations are going nowhere, and the economic and financial sanctions have managed to damage Iran’s economy but have not managed to slow its nuclear program.

When seen from Jerusalem the region seems like a far more dangerous place than it was a few years ago. Everywhere Islamist groups are on the rise, and they have won elections in Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt. No one can say with any certainty, today, whether the overthrow of dictators in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, and hopefully soon in Syria, will lead to stable and moderate democratic governments, even in the middle or long run, or to Islamist regimes determined to confront Israel and the United States.

In my view, there are three key elements to safeguarding Israel’s security in this context.

The *first* is maintaining Israel’s own military edge. Israel has the main responsibility for this but we are a critical part of the picture as well, through our military and intelligence cooperation and our military aid. This part of the picture is, I believe, in very good shape. The Administration claims that defense cooperation and intelligence sharing and cooperation are better than ever and I have no reason to doubt that. It was terrific under Presidents Clinton and Bush, and is terrific now. The problem, from my point of view, is that the Administration thinks that is the end of the story.

It is not—because the *second* element to safeguarding Israel’s security is maintaining excellent political and personal cooperation between the United State and Israel. But our political relationship and cooperation are worse than they have been for many years, perhaps for two decades. And while our military and intel cooperation are largely secret and invisible, our political confrontations are *very* visible and known to all.

I believe that this political distancing from Israel is a deliberate policy on the part of the Administration, which thought that the Bush Administration had gotten too close. In 2009 the head of a leading Jewish organization told the President that diplomatic progress in the Middle East most often occurred when there was no daylight between the positions of the United States and Israel, and said this had been the Bush policy. Mr. Obama pushed back, and said that for eight years there had been no daylight—but also no progress.

My point is not that Mr. Obama was right or wrong in that assessment—and of course I think he was completely wrong—but that this was and presumably is his genuine view. He thought we and even perhaps Israel would be better off with more distance between us.

But in the Middle East that distance is perceived as a source of Israeli weakness. When we try to wriggle out of vetoing UN Security Council resolutions, under any president, the Arab states immediately take notice. When our vetoes are followed by explanations of vote that are filled with frustration at Israel, they take notice again. When our newspapers report that the relationship between the prime minister and the president is hostile and bitter; that the president refused to dine with the prime minister, or refused a photo with him, or most recently refused to agree to meet with him at the UN this month, Israel's security is harmed. And this is true even when military and intel relations are excellent.

I confess, Mr. Chairman, that I do not at all understand our approach when it comes to the Iranian nuclear program, which is a great and indeed existential threat to Israel. We want a negotiated solution, an end to the Iranian nuclear weapons program through diplomacy. I would have thought it obvious, by now for sure, that the diplomacy and the sanctions thus far employed have had no impact on that program. They have not slowed it down. Iran has changed its critical national security policies only twice since 1979: when the Ayatollah Khomeini decided to end the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, and when Iran apparently decided to suspend its nuclear warhead design activities in 2003, under Ayatollah Khamenei, after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In both cases the policy change came due to fear of military defeat and its potential to threaten regime survival.

So it seems clear that if the sanctions and diplomacy are to work, a military threat must also be part of the picture. But we have done everything we can to diminish and undercut the Israeli military threat against Iran. Senior officials such as Sec. Panetta and Gen. Dempsey have repeatedly made statements that suggest Israel has little capacity to damage Iran's program, that there should in any event be no attack for many months to come, and that the outcome of any attack would be chaos in the region. In addition there is Gen. Dempsey's recent remark that he did not want to "complicit" in any Israeli action. I am at a loss to understand why it is useful to say these things publicly, because they seem to me tell Iran its program can go forward with no current risk.

Earlier this year the Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen. Norton Schwartz, told reporters something a bit different. Asked about U.S. capabilities, he replied "What we can do, you wouldn't want to be in the area." That strikes me as the kind of messaging far more likely to convey our firmness and our power, and I wish all the public messaging were equally tough. If there is any chance of a negotiated resolution, it seems to me that it will come only if and when the Iranian leaders are scared—scared that if they do not stop their program they will be subjected to a devastating attack. Today, they certainly do not act as if they are scared, of Israel or of us. The constant public disputes between Israel and the United States, and the obvious White House denigration of Israel's prime minister, certainly do not help Israel's security.

The *third* element in safeguarding Israel's security is, in my view, a strong American policy of fostering the development of stable democracies in the Arab Spring countries. It is obvious that Israel is endangered if those countries, starting with Egypt, become dominated by Islamists, while Israel's security is protected if stable, moderate governments are in power. Ultimately that is up to the people of those countries, of course—but we have a role to play. I believe our role is to support the liberals, moderates, secularists, and democrats to the extent we can and the extent they think is useful. I don't believe we're doing that now. Instead I think we are taking too soft a line with the Islamist governments and parties, and abandoning those whose views are much closer to our own.

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Remember, Mr. Chairman, that when Sec. Clinton went to Egypt in July, there were demonstrations against her by the liberal and moderate groups, and much of the Christian leadership refused to meet with her. Whether that was wise or unwise, their perception is that they are being abandoned while we seek better relations with Islamist and Brotherhood groups. Just to take one example, it is a fact that Egypt's president Morsi has for many years denied that al Qaeda is responsible for the 9/11 attacks. And just two months ago Brotherhood leaders were quoted to the same effect. In last Saturday's *Washington Post*, Robert Satloff reminded us that Mustafa Ghoneimy, head of the Muslim Brotherhood's Guidance Office, said "the Jews" had executed the attacks. "So many Jews worked in these two towers, and on that day, they were off." Meanwhile, the Brotherhood's secretary general Mahmoud Hussein said "one of the intelligence services in America, or the Jews" had conducted the attacks. [[http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/getting-egypts-morsi-to-give-up-911-conspiracy-rhetoric/2012/09/11/4ca304ea-fb97-11e1-8adc-499661afe377\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/getting-egypts-morsi-to-give-up-911-conspiracy-rhetoric/2012/09/11/4ca304ea-fb97-11e1-8adc-499661afe377_story.html)]

Yet an American official delegation was sent to Egypt in August to negotiate the forgiveness of one billion dollars in debt owed to the United States, and the President was apparently going to meet Mr. Morsi at the UN without any demand that such comments be denounced.

Mr. Chairman, it is clear and I want to repeat once more that we cannot determine the outcome of political developments in Arab countries newly freed from dictatorships. But we can stand up for the folks who stand up for us, and assist them, and show them real solidarity. We can stand up for our own principles and values, and make it clear that the new governments can allow Islamist groups to run amok or they can have a good relationship with us, but they cannot have both.

Does this affect Israel's security? I believe it does, because an Egypt or Tunisia or Libya that tries to move toward liberty under law, that places limits of the Islamists' actions and punishes violence and criminal activity, is far more likely to evolve toward a responsible state with which we can have a sustainable and even close relationship, and which will not permit itself to become a haven for violent or terrorist activity against Israel.

So I believe that the United States has, in the last several years, pursued a constricted, narrow approach to safeguarding Israel's security. We have acted as if military and intelligence cooperation is all that is needed, and as if when such cooperation is occurring no other element of U.S. policy is consequential. I believe that policy is wrong and has damaged Israel's security and our own influence, our friends, and our security interests in the Middle East.

Mr. Chairman, I welcome any questions or comments members of the Subcommittee may wish to address to me.

Thank you.