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Testimony before the House of Representatives

Homeland Security Committee

Prepared Statement of Dr. Colin H. Kahl

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Chairman King, Ranking Member Thompson, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Iranian threat to the United States and the possible consequences of U.S. military action against Iran's nuclear program.¹

Iran's nuclear ambitions represent one of the greatest challenges to the security of the United States and the world. In recent months, as Iran's nuclear progress has continued, there has been growing talk in Washington of using U.S. military force to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

President Obama has made clear that:

- An Iranian nuclear weapon is “unacceptable.”
- All options – including military force – remain on the table to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.
- The administration does not endorse a policy of containing a nuclear-armed Iran.

Secretary of Defense Panetta has described Iran's development of a nuclear weapon as a “red line,” and General Martin Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said the United States has a viable contingency plan in the event of a conflict with Iran.

Yet President Obama has also made clear that he prefers a peaceful solution and that there remains a window of opportunity to take advantage of unprecedented pressure on Iran to reach a lasting diplomatic settlement.

This is precisely the right approach. Force should remain an option – indeed, the credible threat of military action can help enable diplomacy. But we have not yet reached the now-or-never moment for employing the military option, and a diplomatic solution is both preferable and the most sustainable path to preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Military action is, and should remain, a last resort – and it should not be used until all non-military avenues have been exhausted.

¹ Much of this testimony draws on Colin H. Kahl, “Not Time to Attack Iran,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2012.

I base this conclusion on four arguments:

- The threat from Iran’s nuclear program is growing, but not yet imminent.
- The costs of military action are potentially very high, both in terms of the escalatory potential of any U.S. strike and the broader regional and global effects.
- Military action is unlikely to result in a permanent solution to Iran’s nuclear threat.
- Opportunities for a diplomatic solution have not yet been exhausted.

The Nuclear Threat from Iran is Growing, But Not Yet Imminent

According to U.S. and Israeli intelligence officials, and independent assessments by the Institute for Science and International Security, it would currently take Iran at least four months to produce sufficient weapons-grade uranium (WGU) for a single nuclear bomb, and at least a year total to produce a crude testable nuclear device, *once Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei decides to do so*. It would take several more years to develop a miniaturized nuclear warhead for a missile.

Although Iran is clearly positioning itself to develop a nuclear weapons capability, James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence, has testified that there is no hard evidence that Khamenei has yet made the final decision to translate those capabilities into a bomb. Moreover, Khamenei is unlikely to dash for a weapon anytime soon because doing so would require Iran to divert low-enriched uranium (LEU) stockpiles and enrich to weapons-grade level at the declared enrichment facilities at Natanz or Fordow. Because International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors would detect such moves, the Iranian regime is unlikely to “break out” until they can dramatically reduce the timeline to build several bombs or build a weapon at new covert facilities. This could be years away.

Therefore, we have not yet reached a moment of decision for the use of force.

Escalation and Spillover Risks

Moreover, when and if a decision to use force is made, it must be done in full appreciation of the likely consequences.

Should the United States decide to strike Iran’s nuclear program, escalation will be difficult to manage on all sides. To reestablish its deterrent, Iran will likely retaliate with missile strikes against U.S. bases in the Gulf, proxy and terrorist attacks against U.S. diplomatic facilities in Iraq and elsewhere, an escalation of lethal aid to insurgents in Afghanistan, and harassment of international shipping in the Strait of Hormuz. Even such “limited” retaliation could produce significant American casualties and drive pressures in the United States for further escalation. And, because of the threat to the global economy, the United States could not turn the other cheek in the face of even minor Iranian provocations in the Strait of Hormuz.

Moreover, although some believe an Iranian response would be carefully calibrated to avoid further escalation with the United States, there are reasons to believe this might not be the case.

Regardless of U.S. intentions, an American attack on Iran's nuclear program would hit the crown jewel of the Iranian regime. It would therefore be difficult for Washington to communicate limited aims to Tehran. When combined with a decades-long history of mutual distrust, an Iranian predisposition to view all U.S. actions as aimed at regime change, the lack of reliable communication channels, and the inevitable fog of war, the prospects for an Iranian overreaction are high.

Mutual fears and miscalculations could also lead to rapid escalation. In the immediate aftermath of a U.S. strike, the Iranians will fear further de-capitation strikes against their missile and naval forces and their command-and-control systems, encouraging them to use their retaliatory capabilities early in the crisis before they lose them.

At the very least, to protect their military assets, Iran will likely activate its integrated air defense network and begin dispersing its ballistic missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, fast attack naval craft, submarines, and mines. It will be difficult for the United States to discern whether these steps are purely defensive or a prelude to offensive operations – and the moves themselves will be incredibly threatening to U.S. forces and commercial shipping in the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. Once a crisis starts, the incentives for pre-emption on both sides, and the prospects for miscalculation and inadvertent escalation, will therefore be very high.

A U.S. strike would likely produce significant spillover risks as well, including: much higher oil prices at a precarious time for the global economy; the possibility of Iranian and proxy retaliation against Israel leading to a wider war in Gaza, Lebanon, or Syria; and the prospect of American allies in the Gulf entering the fray. A unilateral attack against another Muslim country would also further destabilize a region already caught up in the turmoil of the Arab Spring. And, by allowing Iran to play the victim and demonstrate its “resistance” credentials through retaliation against the United States and Israel, a strike could help resuscitate Iranian “soft power” across the Middle East at the very moment when Tehran is facing historic isolation and its only state ally in Syria is wobbling.

Ultimately, if the United States and Iran go to war, there is no doubt that the United States would win in the narrow operational sense. Indeed, with the impressive array of U.S. naval and air forces already deployed in the Gulf, the United States could probably knock Iran's military capabilities back 20 years in a matter of weeks. But a U.S.-Iranian conflict would not be the clinical, tightly controlled, limited encounter some predict, and the prospects for further destabilizing the region would be high.

A Strike Will Only Delay, Not Resolve, Iran's Nuclear Challenge

The potential risks associated with a strike are therefore significant. The benefits are also likely to be more limited than some strike advocates assume.

Short of invasion, occupation, and regime change, there is no way to use military action to ensure that Iran abandons its nuclear program. As senior U.S. defense officials have repeatedly noted, a near-term attack on Iran's nuclear infrastructure would knock the program back, at most, a few years. (It should be noted that a possible Israeli strike would produce similar risks of escalation and regional instability with even more limited effects on Iran's program.)

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of a strike, Iran would likely attempt to rebuild its nuclear program in a way that is harder to detect and potentially more costly to stop. Almost certainly, an attack would motivate Iran's hardliners to kick out IAEA inspectors and incentivize the regime to rapidly rebuild a clandestine nuclear infrastructure.

An attack could also rally domestic Iranian opinion around weaponization. Currently, there seems to be consensus among Iranians that the country has a right to a robust civilian nuclear program, but there is no domestic agreement yet on the pursuit of nuclear weapons. An attack could tilt the internal debate over the nature of Iran's nuclear program in favor of those advocating for a nuclear deterrent to prevent future attacks. And, depending on the target set, a strike could also produce significant Iranian casualties, increasing popular support for a regime that is otherwise struggling to maintain its legitimacy. As a result, there is a risk that a strike would doubly backfire by driving Iran to go for the bomb while strengthening the regime.

To prevent Iran from reconstituting its nuclear program after a strike, the United States would have to be prepared to encircle an even more hostile adversary with a costly containment regime – much like the twelve-year effort to bottle up Saddam Hussein after the 1991 Gulf War – and be prepared to re-attack at a moment's notice. Moreover, in the absence of clear evidence that Iran was dashing for a bomb, a U.S. strike risks shattering international consensus, making post-war containment more difficult to implement. And, with inspectors gone, it would be much harder to detect and prevent Iran's clandestine rebuilding efforts.

In short, far from being a substitute for containment, a military strike could be the prelude to a decades-long containment commitment against an even more implacable nuclear foe.

Time for Diplomacy

Fortunately, we still have time for other options. Through its initial engagement efforts and subsequent success in forging international consensus to pressure the Iranian regime to live up to its obligations, the Obama administration has established the conditions for diplomatic progress. U.S.-backed pressure measures are clearly having an effect. The Iranian economy is struggling under the weight of unprecedented sanctions and Iranian leaders have signaled their willingness to return to the negotiating table. Diplomacy won't be easy, and we should manage our expectations of an immediate breakthrough, but an opportunity exists for all sides to chart a new course and step back from confrontation.

The immediate goal should be to reach an interim confidence-building agreement that stops Iran from enriching at the 19.75 percent level and ships the current 19.75 percent LEU stockpile out of the country in exchange for fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor. This would substantially reduce the near-term risk that Iran will succeed in compressing its dash time to generate WGU. A confidence-building arrangement should also aim to halt further installation of centrifuges at the deeply-buried Fordow enrichment facility near Qom. This would go a long way toward easing the immediate threat driving a potential Israeli military strike this year, and would therefore buy time for further diplomacy.

A final diplomatic settlement that provides sufficient transparency and assurances against weaponization efforts while respecting Iranian rights to a civilian nuclear program under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) will be more difficult to achieve. But, unlike military action, it is the only sustainable solution. The Supreme Leader's repeated insistence that Iran's program is solely for peaceful civilian purposes, as well as his statements that the acquisition or use of nuclear weapons would be a "grave sin" against Islam, may or may not reflect his true beliefs. But they provide a public discourse that would allow the regime to climb down from the current nuclear crisis without losing face, so long as there are clear benefits to any final agreement and Iran's rights under the NPT are respected.

As our diplomats work with the other members of the P5+1 (the permanent U.N. Security Council members, plus Germany) to find a solution to the Iranian nuclear threat, Congress should avoid taking steps that unnecessarily box them in and limit creative options. For example, insisting that all Iranian enrichment activities be suspended *prior to* negotiations, or ruling out any possibility for limited future enrichment even under extraordinary safeguards, will only make a diplomatic outcome more difficult to achieve, and therefore make a costly and unpredictable military confrontation more likely.

Conclusion

Some argue that highlighting the potential costs of an attack on Iran's nuclear program discredits the military option. The opposite is the case. Those who speak too cavalierly or clinically about "surgical strikes" and call publicly for a rush to war with Iran display an under appreciation of the way the conflict is likely to unfold – both in terms of its inherent unpredictability and its human costs – and risk conveying to Iran that America is determined to go to war no matter what they do. That is a recipe for accelerating Iran's drive for a nuclear deterrent and creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of military confrontation.

President Obama clearly understands the costs of war. But that has not stopped him from using force abroad – unilaterally or as part of a coalition – in defense of American national interests, even when doing so was politically risky. The President's decision to surge in Afghanistan, his support for the Libya operation, his relentless global counterterrorism campaign, and his authorization of the daring raid that brought Bin Laden to justice provide ample demonstration. Moreover, even as the administration completed the drawdown in Iraq, it re-postured U.S. forces elsewhere in the region to clearly communicate to Iran that the United States would defend our partners and interests. So, when President Obama says all options are on the table to prevent the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran, there is every

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reason to believe him, and it would be a serious mistake for Iran or anyone else to doubt American resolve. (As he recently told journalist Jeffrey Goldberg, "I don't bluff.")

But the President is also right that we have not yet reached the now-or-never moment. Force is, and should remain, a last resort, not a first choice.

Biography

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Dr. Colin H. Kahl is an associate professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign and a Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) focusing on Middle East security and defense policy.

From February 2009 through December 2011, Dr. Kahl served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East. In that capacity, he developed and implemented the U.S. Defense Department's strategy and policy toward Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Israel and the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. During his tenure, he played a lead role in: designing and overseeing the responsible drawdown and transition strategy in Iraq; shaping the Pentagon's efforts to counter Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions and destabilizing activities; promoting unprecedented defense cooperation with Israel; building a Regional Security Architecture in the Gulf; and crafting the Department's response to the Arab Awakening. In June 2011, Dr. Kahl was awarded the Secretary of Defense Medal for Outstanding Public Service by Secretary Robert Gates.

Dr. Kahl has published widely on U.S. defense strategy in the Middle East, including articles in *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *International Security*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Middle East Policy*, *The National Interest*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. He has also published numerous works on the sources of political instability and violent conflict in developing countries, including *States, Scarcity, and Civil Strife in the Developing World* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

From 2000-2005 and 2007 Dr. Kahl was a professor of international relations in the political science department at the University of Minnesota. In 2005-2006 he was a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow working on stability operations and counterinsurgency at the Department of Defense. In 1997-1998 he was a National Security Fellow at Harvard University's Olin Institute for Strategic Studies. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University in 2000 and his BA in political science from the University of Michigan in 1993.