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Iran and the United States Today

Philip Zelikow, Counselor of the Department

Remarks to the 100th Annual Meeting of the American Jewish Committee

Washington, DC

May 5, 2006

Thank you for inviting me to address the 100 th Annual Meeting of the American Jewish Committee.

You have asked me to address the subject of our government's policy toward Iran .

It is good to start by reviewing why we and other governments around the world are concerned about Iran . You have read much about the nuclear issue. It is important, and I will return to it. But the concerns are much broader than that.

We begin with respect and sympathy for the Iranian people and the great, venerable civilization they have inherited. Recent history has not dealt them a good hand. The revolution of 1979 brought years of internal turmoil and violence, followed by a long, bloody war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq .

That original revolutionary generation was on the attack. Their goal was to spread revolution across the Middle East . Iran has been involved in the international conflict in Lebanon for at least 25 years. Allied with Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran supported attacks on Americans. Iran tried to take the leadership of world Islamic fundamentalism away from Saudi Arabia and helped sponsor violence in the Kingdom. Already at war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq , Iran moved to the edge of war with Saddam's friends, the Gulf Arab states that feared Iranian expansion.

By 1987 and 1988 tensions rose to the point of requiring U.S. political and military intervention to secure the free flow of commerce in the Persian Gulf, including putting some tankers under the U.S. flag in order to protect them. There were some brushes between U.S. and Iranian forces.

During the 1990s, Iran aided terrorist groups that were targeting Americans, Israelis, and Saudis. Agents of the Iranian government were involved in the attack on the U.S. Air Force barracks at Khobar Towers , in Saudi Arabia , in 1996. Lebanese Hezbollah helped Usama Bin Ladin. Iran facilitated the safety and travel of al Qaeda operatives through

their country, both before and after 9/11. The 9/11 Commission report reviewed some of this evidence.

Iranian revolutionaries suffered a setback in 1997 with the election of a more moderate president and pragmatic, war-weary representatives to the Iranian parliament, the Majles. But the last few years have been good ones for the second generation of revolutionaries. Men like Ahmadi-Nejad are, in a sense, the children of Ayatollah Khomeini, the children of the Iran-Iraq war. Many, like Ahmadi-Nejad himself, are alumni of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps with long experience of political struggle and violence. For years they have sought to bring Iran back to the fervor and purity of their revolutionary youth. They purged reformists from the lists of candidates – thousands were barred, including 80 who were already sitting members of parliament. They manipulated the political process, strengthening alliances with sympathetic clerics in the ruling elite. The younger revolutionaries clawed their way back. In 2004 they recovered power in the parliament. In 2005 they gained the presidency too. And today's Iran, as one organization for press freedom has put it, is “the biggest prison for journalists in the Middle East .”

This emerging generation of leaders seeks radical change, at home and abroad. Ahmadi-Nejad has often said he wants to bring Iran back to the “roots of the revolution.” At home he and his allies want to “purify” their society and make it more of a model Islamic state. Some want to prepare their land, and the world, for a final battle of good and evil they believe will precede the coming of the long-awaited Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam. Ahmadi-Nejad concluded his speech to the United Nations, last September, with a prayer to hasten the coming of this “promised one.”

In the meantime, the revolutionaries support governance of the supreme jurist, the unchallengeable authority of Ayatollah Khomeini. They believe that only a dictatorship of the theocrats can mold a reluctant and divided Iranian nation into the fantastic shapes of their dreams.

This regime is a tragedy for the Iranian people. We hope that someday the people will have a free opportunity to choose change. That will be up to Iranians.

Unfortunately, the revolutionary agenda of Iran 's new leaders is not just an affliction for Iran 's people. It translates into aggression and subversion beyond Iran 's borders.

The U.S. would be happy to see good relations between Iran and the new democratic government of Iraq . Many of Iraq 's leaders were helped by Iran during the years of Saddam's persecutions, and we do not feel threatened by the old ties some of these leaders feel to colleagues in Iran .

But, more recently, Iranian agents have been doing more to tear Iraq down than build it up. Working with some of the worst and most violent factions that can be found amid the turmoil, Iranian officials and their allies have supplied equipment and knowhow for deadly attacks against Iraqis, as well as against American and British soldiers. At least for now, Iran appears to prefer that Iraq be a weak, divided, and vulnerable country.

Meanwhile, Iran 's quest for religious purity carries over into scorn for all the neighboring Muslim countries that do not share their own brand of “Islamic correctness.” Iranian agents are active elsewhere in the Persian Gulf . Instead of a helping hand, they foment unrest. In Lebanon , Iran remains a major force trying to pull down creation of a stable national compact. In the Palestinian territories, Iranian money can be found behind the most extreme terrorist groups, like Palestinian Islamic Jihad. While their recent predecessors were at least grudgingly prepared to support whatever peace might satisfy Palestinians, the current regime despises such peacemakers. Ahmadi-Nejad has said that,

“Anybody who takes a step toward Israel will burn in the fire of the Islamic nations' fury.”

Here then is a broad basis for concern: A revolutionary dictatorship, oppressive at home and with an agenda of aggression and subversion beyond its borders. A regime that proudly takes the most extreme positions toward Israel or the country it calls “the Great Satan” – the United States of America . Islamist extremism mixed with plenty of millenarian zeal, where some of Iran 's hardline conservatives openly prepare for an apocalypse they think can be hastened by human hands. A regime that sponsors a kind of modern-day “Comintern” for Islamist extremists, with its formal international relations conducted by diplomats the regime's leaders privately regard with contempt, while they conduct their real international relations largely underground, using agents of the Revolutionary Guards placed across the Middle East.

The regime's extreme goals are matched by a readiness to use extreme means. Terrorism of every kind, harbored at home and sponsored abroad.

This background suggests all the more reason for the world's insistence that Iran cannot have nuclear weapons.

The technical reasons why so many nations suspect Iran 's nuclear intentions have been stated many times. I will add just one point. Iran cannot build a serious civil nuclear energy program without foreign assistance. Its current posture insures it cannot receive such assistance. In other words, while claiming it just wants an alternative source of energy, Iran is proceeding in a way that makes such large-scale energy production impossible. By their own choices, Iran 's leaders are closing off the path to energy in order to march down the path to a bomb.

Our broad-based concerns about Iran lead us to an equally comprehensive set of policies.

We have asked Congress to support bringing news and information to the Iranian people, doing what we can to help keep civil society and the hope of freedom alive.

We are standing up to Iranian subversion in Iraq . We are helping to build a strong, prosperous, and independent Iraq – free to have good relations with both America and Iran .

We are opposing the forces of violence and subversion in the Middle East, whether in the Palestinian territories, or in Lebanon , or in the Persian Gulf .

We are working with states across the region to discuss common security concerns and to counter terrorism, with a new regional approach that has already brought together our ambassadors from throughout the region to coordinate common approaches, in partnership with local governments. On this point I must tell you that, whatever their record in the past, few states are now more determined to kill and capture violent Islamist extremists than the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia . Dozens of gun battles and scores of dead or captured terrorists tell some of the tale.

And we are working to stop – or counter – possible proliferation of weapons of mass destruction anywhere in the region.

As you can see, Iran presents a regional threat. Our policies must take the whole region into account.

At the moment, the world's attention is understandably drawn to the negotiations on a possible United Nations resolution demanding that Iran suspend its enrichment and reprocessing of uranium. France and Britain have proposed a resolution that rightly declares that Iran 's behavior, if unchecked, would be a threat to international peace and security. You will notice that our key allies are with us on this.

As Secretary Rice has often observed, Iran is not like Iraq .

Still, in the case of Iran , we are often asked about military options. Our answer is that we do not take options off the table. But those options are diplomatic too.

A diplomatic path now means showing Iran that there can be real penalties if it chooses to become an international outlaw. Iran is a large, advanced country, dependent on commerce and outside investment. The Iranian people – and perhaps some of Iran 's leaders – worry about isolation. They wonder if such an Iran really is more likely to deliver the future they want for their country, and for their children.

Now the world faces a test. If diplomacy is to work, Iran must see it will pay a price for defiance. The test is beginning now in the work that has begun at the United Nations. Secretary Rice will be there next week.

I look forward to your questions.



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