

White House Narrative on the Iran Nuclear Deal

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**Hearing before House Committee on Oversight and
Government Reform**

Washington, DC
May 17, 2016

Chairman Chaffetz, Ranking Member Cummings, members of the Committee, on behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, thank you for the invitation to testify on the Iran nuclear deal.

For me, as a foreign policy analyst, perhaps the most important revelation made in the recent *New York Times Magazine* profile of Ben Rhodes¹ was its allegation concerning President Obama's overriding strategic purpose in seeking a nuclear deal with Iran – a purpose which, until now, has been largely concealed from the American people. According to the article:

By eliminating the fuss about Iran's nuclear program, the administration hoped to eliminate a source of structural tension between the two countries, which would create the space for America to disentangle itself from its established system of alliances with countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel and Turkey. With one bold move, the administration would effectively begin the process of a large-scale disengagement from the Middle East.

If accurate, this is truly a stunning admission with huge implications. As suggested elsewhere in the article, it represents nothing less than “a radical shift in American foreign policy.” According to the article, Mr. Rhodes' passion for the Iranian nuclear deal did not derive from any investment in the technical details of sanctions, centrifuges, or the future of Iranian politics, but rather “from his own sense of urgency of radically reorienting American policy in the Middle East in order to make the prospects of any American involvement in the region's future wars a lot less likely.”

Whether you agree or disagree with this inclination to step back from the leadership role that the United States has played in the Middle East since World War II, the troubling fact remains that this fundamental shift in strategy has never been openly communicated to the American people. It has never been debated by the U.S. Congress. And it has never been revealed to long-time allies in the Middle East. Determining whether or not this claim is true – that is, whether the White House is now in reality seeking to engineer a large-scale disengagement from the Middle East – is a question of vital importance that the Congress should seek clarification on.

If, in fact, the nuclear deal with Iran is, as Mr. Rhodes suggests, “the center of the arc” for President Obama's efforts to radically transform U.S. policy, it raises a host of concerns. Certainly, it casts doubt on the administration's repeated claim that “No deal was better than a bad deal.” To the extent that the preeminent objective was, in Mr. Rhodes' view, “to eliminate the fuss about Iran's nuclear program” rather than actually eliminate that program, one wonders whether the administration was as demanding in the negotiations as it might otherwise have been.

To take one example: If your goal is to make sure that Iran will never be able to develop nuclear weapons, sunset clauses, like those in the JCPOA that in 15 years allow Iran to produce as much fissile material as it wants, would probably be deemed unacceptable. If, on the other hand, your main interest was creating a decent interval that kicks the can down the road and gives you space to implement a broader strategy of disengagement, then a deal that promises to park the Iranian nuclear issue for a decade and a half might look very good.

¹ David Samuels, “The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign-policy Guru,” *The New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2016. (http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html?_r=0)

Similar concerns exist now that the deal is in place. When Congress was reviewing the JCPOA last summer, the administration made repeated assurances that it would vigorously enforce the agreement while using every tool at its disposal to counter Iran's terrorism, destabilizing regional activities, ballistic missile program, and human rights abuses.

Since then, however, Iran's bad behavior has only escalated. It has significantly increased its combat role in Syria. It has arrested additional U.S. citizens. It has conducted multiple ballistic missile tests. It has fired rockets in close proximity to U.S. ships in the Persian Gulf, held 10 American sailors captive, and threatened to close the Straits of Hormuz.

The U.S. response to these repeated provocations has ranged from tepid to non-existent. Even more worrisome, perhaps, has been the reported U.S. willingness to contemplate granting Iran additional sanctions relief that it failed to negotiate in the JCPOA. Specifically, Iran is demanding access to dollarized financial transactions. This would be a huge unilateral concession that would greatly expand Iran's ability to do business internationally while legitimizing an Iranian banking sector that remains mired in illicit financing activities.

Let me close by stressing that, especially in light of the questions raised by the *New York Times* profile on Mr. Rhodes, it is extremely important that Congress now hold the administration's feet to the fire when it comes to its commitment to combat Iran's continued aggression. At a minimum, Congress should do everything in its power to ensure that Iran receives no new sanctions relief in the absence of significant new Iranian concessions. And far more aggressive use should be made of non-nuclear sanctions to constrain Iran's expanding ballistic missile program and deter the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps from their destabilizing activities in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The bottom line is that the United States should not be sending Iran the message that we now place such a high premium on its continued adherence to the nuclear deal that it has carte blanche to pursue its increasingly threatening policies in other areas that endanger our interests.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and I look forward to your questions.

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John Hannah is currently a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and president of the consulting firm, Global Futures LLC. He also serves as Senior Advisor to Arcanum Global Intelligence and JINSA's Gemunder Center for Defense and Strategy.

Mr. Hannah served on the staff of former Vice President Dick Cheney for eight years, including as the Vice President's national security advisor from 2005-2009. In previous government service, Mr. Hannah worked at the U.S. Department of State during the administrations of President George H.W. Bush and President Bill Clinton.

From 1991-1993, he was a senior member of Secretary of State James A. Baker's Policy Planning Staff with responsibility for the Middle East and Eurasia. From 1993-1996, Mr. Hannah served as a senior policy advisor to Secretary of State Warren Christopher. From 1987-1991, Mr. Hannah was a senior fellow and deputy director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Between 1999-2001, Mr. Hannah practiced law at the Washington office of Powell, Goldstein, Frazer & Murphy, specializing in international dispute resolution.

Mr. Hannah is a graduate of Duke University and The Yale Law School. He is married with two children.

