

Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs
R. Nicholas Burns
Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

May 19, 2005

“United States’ Policy Toward Iran”

INTRODUCTION

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Biden and distinguished Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to discuss with you today United States’ policy toward Iran.

Iran remains a serious foreign policy challenge for our country and the democratic world at large. For nearly a quarter century the United States and Iran have been without diplomatic relations. With the images of our Embassy hostages seared so deeply into our collective consciousness, it is easy to forget that our countries once enjoyed excellent relations and, only a generation ago, 200,000 Iranians were studying in the U.S. The United States is proud to be home to a large community of extremely talented Iranian immigrants who preserve a cultural and personal bridge to Iran where diplomatic contact long ago broke off.

It is not with the Iranian people, but with the Iranian regime’s threatening and often irresponsible behavior, that our concerns rest. We have repeatedly made clear our grave concerns regarding the Iranian government’s pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and long-range delivery systems; its sponsorship of terrorism including its direct support to Hizballah and Palestinian rejectionist groups; its appalling human rights and democracy record; its support for violent opposition to efforts to achieve peace in the Middle East; and its interference in the affairs of its neighbors -- especially Afghanistan and Iraq.

Each of these issues is of vital concern to the United States and, in each and every case, Iran has a position inimical to that of the United States and the international community. At a time when countries across the region are moving towards greater openness, political participation and economic freedom, Iran stands in stark contrast.

Our concerns with Iran are not merely historical; they do not simply reflect the pain felt, real as that pain is, over the storming of our Embassy more than two and a half decades ago. It is Iran’s actions and policies today that drive our policy. Iranian government policies, loosely grouped into three broad categories that I will discuss briefly today, directly threaten U.S. interests in the region and beyond.

In each of these three areas, Iran has a demonstrated track record of moving backwards against the tide of world events. I will start with Iran's freedom deficit, appropriate given the recent election of democratic governments in two of Iran's neighbors and the upcoming June 17 Presidential elections in Iran.

IRAN'S DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD

Iran is a great country with a unique history and culture. The Iranian people have made extraordinary contributions in many fields for thousands of years. Modern Iran will undoubtedly remain a significant country in the future of the broader Middle East.

The United States believes the future of Iran should be democratic and pluralistic. We support those who wish to see Iran transformed from a rigid, intolerant theocracy to a modern state. A peaceful, democratic Iran would be a key feature in a reformed, more democratic Middle East. We believe Iran is a country in the process of change. Some two-thirds of its people are below the age of thirty-five. Many young Iranians support the need for a more positive relationship with the U.S. In fact, the U.S. may have a more positive public image in Iran than in other countries of the region. We sense that the sentiment among ordinary Iranians for change – for reform and democracy – is strong. But that sentiment is ignored by the ruling clique.

Iran suffers from a deficit of freedom. The regime's human rights record remains abysmal and the government continues to commit numerous, serious abuses, including summary executions, disappearances, torture and other inhumane treatment. In the late 1990s, elements of Iran's secret services murdered a number of intellectuals and oppositionists. In 2000, a courageous journalist named Akbar Ganji was imprisoned for uncovering the truth and reporting it in his newspaper. Since Ganji was imprisoned, many journalists and even webbloggers have been taken into prison where they have been abused and threatened. The Iranian government's actions have essentially eliminated the free press in Iran. In 2003, an Iranian-Canadian photojournalist, Zahra Kazemi, was beaten to death in detention. The investigation and trial have been a farce and the Canadian government has taken steps to scale back its relations with Iran.

During student protests in June 2003, 4,000 demonstrators were arrested; a few are still held. In December 2003, Parliamentarian Mohsen Mirdamadi was beaten by vigilantes as he started a speech in Yazd. Before the 2004 elections, when reformist members of parliament signed a petition to the Supreme leader asking for more democracy, they were threatened with arrest and arbitrarily stripped of their parliamentary immunity.

In fall 2004, for a second year in a row, the United States co-sponsored and actively supported a Canadian resolution at the UN General Assembly condemning the human rights situation in Iran. The Iran human rights resolution passed in the UN General Assembly's 59th Plenary, sending an important signal to the Iranian people that the international community recognized their suffering and to the Iranian Government that dialogue on human rights was no substitute for concrete action to improve its record, and that the serious concern about Iran's overall international behavior would not blunt the international community's focus on the internal human rights situation.

On the surface, the Iranian government points to a picture of an active democracy in which Iranians participate regularly in national and local elections. But this is a veneer behind which lies a perverted process whose integrity is severely compromised by the oppressive oversight exercised by hard-line clerical bodies. One of the most egregious recent examples of this extraordinary system was the rigging of the February 2004 Majles elections, in which the Guardian Council disqualified thousands of reformist candidates, including more than 85 sitting members of the Majles. We commend the bravery and dedication of the many ordinary Iranians who put their livelihoods at risk to advance the principles of democracy, religious tolerance, and the accountability of the government to its own people.

We are similarly very concerned that the upcoming June 17 Presidential elections will represent another setback for the democratic hopes of the Iranian people. Candidate registration started Tuesday, May 10 in Iran and ended May 15. At the end of the registration period, the names of the Presidential candidates will be forwarded to the 12-member Guardian Council, which then has up to 10 days to assess the eligibility of the candidates. There is every indication the June election will not result in a meaningful expression of the popular will, because the political process and the media are controlled and manipulated by an unelected few – the clerical elite and their associates. These unelected leaders dominate Iran’s political system, have the power to intimidate and disqualify candidates, and through the exercise of that power have stymied popular demands for freedom. Of the over 1,000 Iranians who have registered to run in the upcoming elections, the Guardian Council is likely to approve less than a dozen candidates. Indeed, in 2001, only 10 of the 814 registered candidates were allowed to run. The diminished role of women in Iranian political life since the February 2004 Majles elections is another clear indicator of the regime’s effectiveness in stymieing free popular will and of its anti-democratic beliefs.

In November 2003 at the National Endowment for Democracy, President Bush outlined a forward strategy for freedom in the Middle East. He said that “sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe -- because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty.” In his 2005 Inaugural Address, the President reiterated America’s support for the people of the broader Middle East and North Africa in their fight for freedom. “We will persistently clarify the choice before every ruler in every nation: The moral choice between oppression, which is always wrong, and freedom, which is eternally right.” President Bush spoke directly to the Iranian people in his February 2, 2005, State of the Union Address, saying: “As you stand for your own liberty, America stands with you.”

The Administration is deeply appreciative of Congress’ and this Committee’s support for the resources that enable us to implement the President’s Freedom agenda and reach out to the Iranian people. A few examples:

- Since May 2003 we have funded a Persian language website that serves as a “virtual embassy” by providing the only channel for both U.S. policy statements in Persian as well as a range of information about democracy, American society and values, and consular information.

- We are also funding political discussion in Persian on television and radio broadcasts into Iran

under the auspices of the Voice of America. Recently VOA announced that it was increasing the duration of these broadcasts. The U.S. government also funds news and music broadcasts into Iran on Radio Farda. This service is specifically targeted at the large population of younger people in Iran.

-- The FY2005 Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations Act doubled to three million dollars the funds available to our Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Bureau to support the advancement of human rights and democracy in Iran. We are currently reviewing applications for FY2005; in 2004 we provided one million dollars to document human rights abuses inside Iran and \$500,000 for National Endowment for Democracy programming.

-- We have also recently established, with European and Canadian allies, a Human Rights Working Group that will convene quarterly to share information and coordinate our approach to the issue.

These initiatives and programs require resources. Our commitment of funds to support freedom in Iran is tangible evidence of the United States' support for a better future for the Iranian people, and we appreciate Congressional support for our programs and efforts.

The freedom deficit and the severe restriction on free expression and fair elections is the first of our concerns with Iranian government policy.

COUNTERING IRAN'S NUCLEAR AMBITIONS

A second and critical U.S. concern is our strong and resolute opposition to Iran acquiring a nuclear weapons capability. Iran's desire to acquire a nuclear weapon threatens the peace and security of the United States, our friends and allies, and the stability of the entire region. Iran's demonstrated track record of nuclear deception and denial is troubling, including an 18-year history of trying to hide from the world a clandestine enrichment program, undeclared plutonium separation experiments, and other suspicious activities, as reported by IAEA Director General El Baradei. Iran failed to report the irradiation of uranium targets and subsequent processing of those targets to separate plutonium. Iran failed to report the use of imported natural UF₆ for the testing of centrifuges at the Kalaye Electric company. Iran failed to declare the pilot enrichment facility at Kalaye Electric, the laser enrichment plant at the Tehran Nuclear Research Center, and the pilot uranium laser enrichment plant at Lashkar Ab'ad. The list of Iran's failures goes on and on and represents – not mere administrative failures – but, in our view, the foundation pillars of a clandestine nuclear weapons development program.

We see no sign Iran has made the necessary strategic decision to abandon what we conclude is an active nuclear weapons program. Iran's repeated brinksmanship in its negotiations with the "European Union Three" or EU3, of France, Germany and the United Kingdom, is part of Iran's continuing effort to divide the international community, weaken our resolve and avoid adhering to its international obligations.

On this issue, though, let there be no misunderstanding in Tehran. The international community stands united: Iran must not be permitted to develop the capacity to build or deliver a nuclear weapon. Many in the United States were skeptical of the chances of success for the EU3 diplomatic effort, given Iran's track record. But President Bush, on his recent visits to Europe and Moscow, heard a clear commitment from our friends and Allies: we share the goal of denying Iran a nuclear weapon and recognize that there must be consequences should Tehran fail to adhere to its international commitments. Our partners made clear that Iran must provide objective guarantees to demonstrate that it is not pursuing a clandestine weapons program under the cover of a civilian nuclear energy program. On this point, the bar for Iran must be set high: its history of deception of the IAEA and the world has undermined the international community's trust. To paraphrase a great American President: if we don't trust, then we really must verify.

During his visit to Europe in February, the President heard from our friends of the importance of United States' support for the EU3 diplomatic process, in order to reinforce to the world that the ball lies squarely in Iran's court to adhere to its agreements. On March 11, Secretary Rice announced that the U.S. was prepared to take tangible, practical steps in support of the EU3 diplomatic track, and would no longer block Iran's application to join the WTO and would consider licensing the export of spare parts for civilian passenger aircraft to Iran. Since that time, we have maintained a near constant dialogue with the EU3. For example, the Secretary saw UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw on Tuesday, and I speak on a daily basis with my UK, French and German counterparts to reinforce our utmost support for their leadership on this incredibly vital issue to our shared security interests.

The EU3 deserves our appreciation for its efforts to resolve Iran's nuclear challenge through patient, principled diplomacy. Iran appears to have maintained its suspension pledge since November 22, 2004 but has asserted several times in recent weeks that it intends to resume uranium conversion activities at Isfahan which are covered by its November 2004 agreement with the EU3, and would require the breaking of IAEA seals in place to monitor that suspension. The Europeans have made plain their deep concern with this possibility and reaffirmed that these activities would constitute an Iranian breach of the agreement, ending the negotiation process and requiring action by the international community. We support the EU3 in their commitment to the Paris Agreement signed in November and believe that, if it is breached, the United States and the EU3 must support a resolution in the IAEA Board of Governors reporting Iran to the UN Security Council.

President Bush and Secretary Rice have made clear publicly that we support a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the Iranian nuclear problem. That is why we support the EU3 process. Our message to Tehran today is: adhere to the Paris Agreement, maintain suspension of all nuclear-related activities, and negotiate in good faith the eventual cessation and dismantling of all sensitive nuclear fuel cycle activities.

The spotlight must remain on the Iranian government and on the requirement that the Iranian government adhere to its international commitments. Unfortunately, we see no sign of a strategic decision to abandon nuclear weapons efforts, and, particularly in the light of recent threats by Tehran to resume enrichment, we remain deeply skeptical of Iran's intentions. U.S.

policy toward Iran on this urgent issue is resolute. As President Bush noted on September 27, 2004: “We’ve made it clear, our position is that they won’t have a nuclear weapon.”

IRAN’S DESTABILIZING IMPACT ON THE REGION AND BEYOND

Iran has already used another unconventional weapon – terrorism – against innocent Americans, Europeans, Arabs, Israelis and others. Iran remains the most active state sponsor of terrorism in the world. The State Department’s 2004 Country Reports on Terrorism notes that “its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Ministry of Intelligence and Security were involved in the planning and support of terrorist acts and continued to exhort a variety of groups to use terrorism in pursuit of their goals.” Iran’s extensive involvement in supporting terrorism truly puts it in a class by itself.

We are deeply concerned about Iran's connections to numerous terrorist groups, including those that violently object to the right of Israel to exist or to any negotiated peace between Israelis and Palestinians. For example, Iran provides money, weapons, and training to HAMAS, Hizballah, and Palestinian rejectionist groups. These are some of the world’s most deadly terrorist organizations, responsible for the killing of thousands of innocents, including Americans. Hizballah, for example, has been responsible for more American deaths than any other terrorist organization in the world apart from al-Qaida. Furthermore, Iran’s support for these groups fuels terrorist violence in Israel and the Occupied Territories, seeking to undermine the prospects for Middle East peace at this moment of historic opportunity.

Iran continues to hold senior al-Qaida leaders who are wanted for murdering Americans and others in the 1998 East Africa Embassy bombings and for plotting to kill countless others. Iran has refused to identify those individuals in its custody.

We have sanctioned Iran as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, and called for the regime to abide by the requirements of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1373 to deny safe haven to those who plan, support, or commit terrorist acts and to affirmatively take steps to prevent terrorist acts by providing early warning to other states by exchange of information. Iran should immediately turn over to face justice all al-Qaida related terrorists in its custody or on Iranian soil to appropriate jurisdictions.

We are also working closely with the UN and our key allies, particularly France, to fully implement UNSCR 1559, which calls for the dismantling of all armed militias in Lebanon, including Lebanese Hizballah. Iran has provided Lebanese Hizballah with funding, safe haven, training and weapons. We all remember that Lebanese Hizballah was responsible for the death of hundreds of Americans in Beirut in the 1980s.

As we meet with our allies from around the world, we take every opportunity to express our concerns about Iran’s support for terrorism and our concerns about Iranian interference in the efforts to secure a lasting, just peace between the Israelis and Palestinians. We actively seek the involvement of the international community to reflect those concerns in their dealings with the regime, diplomatically as well as commercially.

Iran must also live up to its commitments to develop productive relationships with its neighbors, support the new Iraqi government, and renounce in word and deed any relationship to individuals or groups that support instability and engage in terrorism.

Iran is not meeting these commitments with regard to Iraq. Iran made commitments to Iraq and the international community at the November 2004 Ministerial Conference in Sharm El Sheikh to assist Iraq in its security (including border control), to support the political process, and to practice non-interference in Iraq's internal affairs. Unfortunately, we see little evidence of Iranian assistance, and continuing troubling indications of Iranian interference in Iraqi internal affairs.

We will continue to work closely with the new Iraqi government to address all issues related to Iraq's stability and security. In our dealings throughout the region we continue to stress the importance of protecting Iraqi sovereignty.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the success of the worst regime elements in reasserting control over parliament, Iranian society is moving in its own positive direction. Iranians are unhappy about the Guardian Council's heavy-handed exclusion of reformist candidates from elections, the government's curtailment of press freedoms, and the deteriorating human rights situation. In addition, they are frustrated by the country's chronic unemployment and their government's failure to provide jobs for the thousands of young Iranians entering the work force each year. Structural flaws in the economy can be papered over with extraordinarily high oil revenues, but they don't go away. Iran is a great nation which has given the entire world a powerful cultural legacy and the Iranians have much yet to offer in the years ahead.

It is our hope that U.S. relations with Iran will change for the better; but that cannot happen without a change in Iran's policies in the areas I have discussed. The pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems makes Iran less secure and the region more unstable. The regime must end its sponsorship of terrorism, including its direct support to Hizballah and Palestinian rejectionist groups and begin to help build a better life for all parties involved. American citizens hear about Iranians who have gone to jail or have been murdered. How can we be silent when we see individual Iranians risking everything to achieve the democratic freedoms we ourselves treasure? How can we turn our backs when the Iranian regime attempts to subvert the newborn democracies in Iraq and Afghanistan?

We have had no diplomatic relations with Tehran for more than 25 years, through five Presidential administrations from both political parties. While we are optimistic about Iran's future, the onus to improve its relationship with the rest of the world is squarely on Tehran and will be found in concrete actions in the three broad areas I discussed briefly today. For all the lack of diplomatic contact, there is no lack of communication about what is necessary to transform this relationship. The government in Tehran knows what is expected of it, and must act if it wishes to rejoin the community of civilized nations.