

**The Honorable Steve Chabot, Chairman  
Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia**

**“Axis of Abuse: U.S. Human Rights Policy toward Iran and Syria, Part II”**

**September 22, 2011**

The Subcommittee will come to order. Good afternoon. I want to welcome all of my colleagues to this hearing of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia.

As our witnesses note in their written statements, the human rights abuses being perpetrated at the hands of the regimes in Tehran and Damascus are as horrifying as they are widespread. In the aftermath of the stolen June 2009 “election” in Tehran, the world watched as the Iranian regime beat, tortured, raped, and murdered its way through the protests that followed. Just over 6 months ago, Syria, the Iranian regime’s closest ally in the region, joined Tehran in its ruthless repression of pro-democracy protests. As protests intensified, the Assad regime initiated a brutal crackdown that continues even as we speak. It is now estimated that over 2,700 Syrians have been killed and reports coming out of Syria speak of unconscionably heinous human rights abuses.

Today’s hearing, however, was called to examine U.S. policy. Two months ago, this Subcommittee had the privilege of hearing Assistant Secretaries Feltman and Posner discuss the Obama Administration’s human rights policies towards Iran and Syria. Since our last hearing, the Obama Administration has taken a number of steps for which they deserve credit, especially on Syria. Although it took far too much time and far too many dead bodies, the Administration has finally come out and called for Bashar al-Assad’s departure from power. It also implemented sanctions against various high-ranking Syrian regime authorities, many of which have been mirrored by our allies abroad. Unfortunately, despite these recent developments, my concerns about our policy remain. The Obama Administration’s human rights policies towards Iran and Syria have been both feeble and late. Rather than seizing the historic opportunity presented to it, the Administration dithers by slowly inching towards challenging the legitimacy of these regimes in any meaningful way. Why, for example, have we sanctioned the leadership in Damascus and not the leadership in Tehran? When the Administration does take action, it is usually in the form of a strong statement, such as President Obama’s statement at the State Department in May. Yesterday at the General Assembly, for example, the president noted that we have “sanctioned those who trample on human rights abroad.”

But we haven’t; at least not nearly thoroughly enough. Indeed, my concern is not as much with what the Administration *is* doing as it is with what the Administration is *not* doing. The result is a growing disconnect between our words and our actions. As I am sure our witnesses will discuss, there are many steps which we should be taking which we are not: individuals we should

be sanctioning, opposition groups we should be standing with, and regimes we should be condemning at every possible opportunity.

That the Administration continues to eschew calling for a transition to a democratic government in Iran is evidence of one of two possibilities: Either it still believes that a grand bargain on the illicit nuclear program is possible or it is concerned that to do so will—like in Libya—create a situation in which it must then ensure that the regime actually falls. The fine line that the Administration is walking by condemning but not seriously challenging the regime in Tehran puts it in an untenable position and, from the outside, it appears to be hedging rather than leading. And although the Administration may think that to do so puts itself in an advantageous position, it seriously underestimates the impact its actions—or lack thereof—have on actual outcomes.

Indeed, the perception that calling for a democratic transition requires U.S. military operations to forcibly depose those in power is an excuse to avoid making a more permanent break with regimes like the one in Tehran. Words, like many things, have a currency, and that currency is action. To highlight human rights abuses and then sanction only eleven individuals and three entities is unacceptable. To vacillate between condemning the Iranian regime and then later offering it a lifeline pits us against the people of those countries.

I fear, however, that these missteps reflect a deeper problem: that the Administration lacks any overarching strategy towards the region. The Administration is fond of saying that although its foreign policy is guided by core principles such as the promotion of democracy and respect for human rights, each country is different and, as such, requires a tailored approach. Although it is certainly true that no two countries have the identical set of circumstances, this argument must not be an excuse for inaction or a lack of strategic vision.

Until very recently, the Obama Administration's policy towards Iran and Syria was characterized chiefly by its engagement with the ruling regimes. Although I did not agree with this policy at the time, it is all the more wrong today. The Obama Administration must realize that the U.S. can no longer do business with either of these regimes. They are both beyond salvation.