Statement before the
House Committee on Homeland Security
January 15, 2020

Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Rogers, Distinguished members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to come before the Committee today to discuss a set of issues which has gripped the U.S. government, the Congress, and indeed, much of the American public for the last two weeks. The subject you have asked me and my fellow panelists to address is a critical one – the homeland security implications of rising U.S.-Iran tensions; specifically, what we might anticipate in the aftermath of the U.S. lethal targeting of Qassem Soleimani on January 3. I would like to acknowledge up front a debt I owe to the invaluable primary research and analysis on the Shia militias that form Qassem Soleimani's "foreign legion" of proxies, done by my colleagues at the Washington Institute, Phillip Smyth and Michael Knights, work which has been invaluable background for my discussion today.

Four days after Soleimani's death, Iran responded dramatically, with a volley of ballistic missiles directed at two bases hosting U.S. military trainers in Iraq. We cannot take FM Javad Zarif's statement immediately afterwards – that Iran has "concluded proportionate measures in self-defense" -- as a signal that Tehran's missile strike definitively brings this matter to a close, however. Rather, we are in a pause in an escalatory cycle, one in which the US and Iran are very likely to find themselves once again facing decisions on a kinetic response, sooner rather than later.

The factors driving this cycle are numerous, although Soleimani's vision to drive the U.S. from the region is long-standing – the essential stalemate between Washington's "maximum pressure campaign" and Tehran's "counter-pressure campaign" sets the more immediate context; Iran's move up the escalatory ladder was on vivid display last summer in the waters of the Persian Gulf, against Saudi Aramco, and in repeated attacks on U.S. military and civilian personnel in Iraq. Tehran's view is that it is already in a war, an economic war waged by the U.S., but its leaders are equally convinced that they have staying power and tools that the U.S. lacks. Iran has developed doctrine, systems and methods for operating in the "gray zone" rather than in head-on conventional conflicts, and its array of asymmetrical tools, which range from attacks on shipping, assassination, terrorism,

to a formidable array of regional proxies provide it the way to continue countering U.S. pressure. While wreaking revenge. As Suzanne Maloney put it recently, "The regime's determination to end the American siege is magnified by an ideological and strategic zeal to settle scores for Soleimani's death, to preserve or even expand the footprint that he achieved for Iran across the broader Middle East, and ideally emerge from this crisis with some big strategic gain, such as durably eroding U.S. presence and influence in the broader Middle East."

I would like to focus in my remarks on the geo-political ramifications of Jan. 3, in particular in Iraq and the Persian Gulf, two arenas where Tehran is most likely to look for opportunities to avenge Soleimani's death. It is there that Tehran will almost certainly revert to a campaign of pressure and attacks. In Iraq, Tehran has long judged it enjoys a decisive advantage over the U.S. in influence and coercive tools. In the Gulf, Tehran has repeatedly demonstrated to Washington's closest allies that their strategic vulnerabilities are acute, notwithstanding the presence of long-established U.S. military facilities and thousands of U.S. service members.

If ever two adversaries of the U.S. brought on their own deaths, it was Iranian Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and Jamal Jaafar Ibrahimi (AKA Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis), commander of the Iraqi militia Kata'ib Hezballah. Killed as they departed Baghdad airport together, Soleimani and Al Muhandis were long-time collaborators in a common project to target US troops to drive them out of Iraq; their pioneering handiwork in the use of explosively-formed projectiles (EFP) killed hundreds of U.S. service members and maimed thousands more. More recently, KH's task from Soleimani – to harass and target U.S. military personnel with repeated shelling of training sites over much of 2019 -- finally resulted in the death of an American on Dec. 27; the US response two days later, targeting five KH sites, was met with a violent assault by the militia and its supporters on the US Embassy in Baghdad.

Both architect and orchestrator of Iran's destructive regional policies in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Bahrain, Soleimani had achieved a singular stature in Iran and in the wider Middle East by dint of his own extraordinary media profile and the multiple successes he claimed on behalf of Tehran: for turning the tide of Syria's civil war to Bashar Al Assad's favor; for being first on the battlefield in 2014 as ISIS forces surged across northern Iraq towards Erbil; for his small-investment-huge-payout decision to train and equip Yemen's Houthis with advanced missile technology, such that they could strike deep into Saudi territory, threaten the UAE and put international shipping in the Bab Al Madeb at risk; for his unmatched role as kingmaker or breaker in Iraq, in no small part through the

network of militias he had created, groomed, trained and resourced from the early months after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. As my colleague, Phillip Smyth, has neatly put it, "Iran's Shia militia network are their true nuclear program and one that has achieved measurably huge results for Tehran" in the region.

At the time of his death Soleimani thus appeared to be a Colossus bestride the region. He was a cult figure for Iran's legions of foreign Shia proxies, and an interlocutor respected and feared in equal measure by officials in Iran's near-beyond.

But if Soleimani's demise at US hands has electrified both regional and foreign audiences, the operation's second major casualty – collateral damage or intended target, depending on the US official asked – is potentially as impactful for Iraq, and therefore for U.S. interests. Al Muhandis was both head of the most powerful militia in Iraq, Kata'ib Hezballah, and as Deputy Commander of the PMF exerted far-reaching command and control over nearly 50 other organizations in the PMF network; his killing will have direct bearing on the future of the U.S. military presence in Iraq and our ability to counter terrorist threats to the U.S. homeland.

Iraq

History shows us that removing a leader of violent movements – even one as supremely capable, influential and charismatic as Soleimani – is rarely sufficient *on its own* to permanently disrupt the trajectory of events or even the organization itself. In Iran, Soleimani leaves behind a well-oiled, disciplined machine acting on behalf of a powerful, if economically stressed, state. Iran's Supreme Leader moved immediately to appoint Ismail Qaani, Soleimani's deputy in the Quds Force, as successor. This move reinforced the dual message of organizational continuity and Iran's relentless commitment to the Resistance cause. In the days to follow, IRGC leaders underlined the latter point in public messaging: with the commander of the IRGC flanked by the flags of member groups of regional resistance, including that of Iraq's Hashd al Shaabi, and with IRGC-Quds Force commander Qaani's meeting with individual commanders of Iraq's Shia militia community.

In Iraq, a hard push by Iranian-affiliated militias – through their representation at the highest levels of the Iraqi government and their political representation in the parliament – has resumed to affect the departure of the 5,000-strong U.S. military training mission. Qassem Soleimani's project for post-ISIS Iraq was to end the US military presence in Iraq, and with its departure, to reduce to the degree possible

US influence there. An earlier effort in Iraq's Council of Representatives in the spring of 2019 was sidelined. But in the wake of Soleimani's death, the Council passed a non-binding resolution requesting the government begin the process for ending the foreign troop presence in Iraq; passed with a fraudulent quorum, the vote was obtained after overt threats by KH and its allies against MPs. Notwithstanding those threats, virtually all Kurdish and Sunni MPs stayed away from the vote. And notwithstanding the fraudulent nature of the parliamentary vote, Iraq's acting PM repeatedly announced his request of the U.S. to begin consultations on winding up the U.S. military mission.

The pressure by Iranian-backed militias is unrelenting – within the government, on the acting PM, on Shia and Kurdish politicians, and most brutally, against the throngs of Iraqi protestors across Baghdad and southern, Shia-dominated Iraq, who have rejected both Iranian interference and the recent threat-induced parliamentary vote.

Prominent Iraqi militia leaders like Asaiab Ahl Al Haq's Qais al Khazali have publicly declared that Tehran's missile strike, while honoring Soleimani, would not suffice as a response for Al Muhandis' death. Iraqi militia leaders have made overt threats to resume kinetic targeting of U.S. military personnel; indeed, there have been several instances of rockets falling in Baghdad since the Iranian missile strikes. For the moment, Iraq's Iranian-affiliated militia community appears to be following Tehran's direction to pause, but that is a pause likely to be short-lived.

The PMF Problem

Iraq's evolution since 2003 has been as much shaped by Qassem Soleimani's vision for the country as by the energy, money, and lives spent under three successive U.S. administrations. Soleimani's focus on Iraq was unblinking and unsparing; his approach reflected the perspective of a war-time generation of leaders, that Iraq posed the foremost national security threat to Iran. Thus Soleimani worked methodically and largely successfully for a set of unvarying objectives there: an Iraq always weak vis-à-vis Iran, its Shia-majority political class reliant on and deferential to his "guidance," and above all, the government itself suborned and weakened by a set of proxy armed actors not under the state's control and largely responsive to Iranian direction. Today approximately 3 dozen such militias operate in Iraq, commanding some 60,000 members.

The Iraq of 2020 aptly reflects Soleimani's efforts. With the departure of U.S. troops in 2011, Iraqi militias were re-directed by Soleimani to Syria's civil war,

where they gained critical battlefield experience, under IRGC-QF direction fighting on behalf of Bashar Al Assad. In the crisis of ISIS' surge across northern Iraq in 2014 and with Grand Ayatollah Sistani's exhortation to Iraqi youth to volunteer for the fight, Soleimani oversaw and shaped directly the explosion of Iraqi militias and took a role on the battlefield in directing their efforts. In 2016 the militias were folded formally into the Iraqi security forces and termed the Popular Moblilization Forces. Iraqi National Security Advisor Falah Fayyad is double-hatted as its commander, but the real power to the organization lay with its Deputy, KH Commander Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis – not with the PM, to whom, Commander-in-Chief, the PMF notionally reported. Securing the funding of the state, the member militias of the PMF from the outset retained a dual-key chain of command, retaining primary loyalty to their political commanders, many of whom in turn followed Iranian "guidance," if not direction.

These militias flout Iraqi law and the constitution in myriad ways; they did so in recruiting fighters for Syria, and they do so currently in operating training sites and arms depots that are no-go zones for the Iraqi security forces. But nowhere has that allegiance to a set of leaders outside the state – outside Iraq itself – been more evident than in the repeated targeting of U.S. military training sites and U.S. diplomatic facilities by KH, AAH and other militias for the past 18 months; their participation in Iran's program to transfer advanced missile technology to Lebanese Hezballah; and KH's targeting of the Saudi East-West pipeline.

Thus is born a militia state, or one at real risk of becoming so. With the fall of Mosul to Iraqi government forces in December 2017, the Iraqi government should have moved to complete the transformation or compulsory demobilization of the constituent members of the PMF into the ISF. It was unable to do so. As recently as September 2019 the Iraqi PM felt compelled to issue an ultimatum to the PMF to hand over weaponry to the state, permit ISF access to militia arms depots and bases, and to cease all unlicensed activities. The reason? Press reports identifying KH as the entity behind the May 2019 attack on Saudi Arabia, and months of apparent foreign airstrikes on KH arms depots that were supporting Iran's work to transfer advanced missile technology to Lebanon for Hezballah. But to no effect.

With Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis's death, and a successor still unnamed, the key Iraqi militias of significance, closest to Iran, remain in a state of uncertainty. They are maneuvering rapidly to try to shape the next government, however.

The most important of the militias closely affiliated with the Quds Force -- the Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezballah, Asaib Ahl Al Haq, Kata'ib Al Imam Ali,

Kata'ib Sayyid Al Shuhada – also command the lion's share of the PMF rank and file, 18-25,000 for Badr alone, and the rest comprising somewhere in the range of 31,000 members. They have all deployed "in-theatre" – in Syria; several participate actively in Iran's "precision missile" project to move parts and technology from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon; several have engaged in lethal support and training for extremists in Bahrain, and one – KH – to date has engaged in attacks outside Iraq/Syria, on Saudi Arabia. While smaller by far in numbers, the phenomenon of drawing foreign fighters into their ranks from Europe (generally dual-national citizens) to fight in militia ranks in Syria has been observed. One possible model for the future -- the risk of reverse flows, establishment of cells abroad as Hezballah has done successfully -- should certainly not be ruled out.

The Gulf

The longstanding U.S. military presence in the Middle East ranges currently between 50-65,000 personnel, fully half of whom at any given time may be stationed in the six Gulf Cooperation Countries. While the US naval presence in Bahrain, now headquarters of the Fifth Fleet, dates back to the late 1940s, our operating presence in the other Gulf countries largely date to immediately after the first Gulf war; US forces in Saudi Arabia being a particularly sensitive issue internally, the US has not had "permanent" stationing of troops there since 2003, although the Administration has sent several thousand to the Kingdom in recent months in response to last year's attacks on Saudi energy infrastructure by Iran.

Yet despite that presence, there is no question that the GCC countries – with the possible exception of Oman – have felt extraordinarily exposed and vulnerable for the last eight months, a period of sustained, escalating tensions between the U.S. and Iran and thinly-disguised attacks by the latter on Gulf energy infrastructure and oil tankers traversing the Gulf. Persian Gulf energy fuels the world economy, meeting nearly 20 percent of global demand. But these small and vulnerable states are also uniformly embarked on efforts to diversify their economies away from fossil fuel dependency, redefining themselves as hubs for tourism, transportation, finance and banking, and manufacturing – sectors which depend every bit as global oil markets do on a secure and stable environment.

Notwithstanding decades-long huge investments by the GCC countries in U.S. and European weapons systems, including missile defense, these six countries remain hugely vulnerable. With small populations, economies which have developed with a significant dependency on expatriate labor, the GCC countries are particularly

vulnerable to Iran's full suite of asymmetrical tools, cyber in particular. For countries that rely on desalinization for 95% of their potable water supply, that import 90-95% of their foodstuffs, that have diversified their economies by making themselves hubs for global trade, air traffic, shipping and finance, a prolonged takedown of the electrical grid alone would be devastating.

U.S.-Iran tensions soared with the Administration's announcement in April 2019 that it would aim to "drive to zero" Iran's oil exports; a stark U.S. warning to Iran followed on May 5 – asserting intelligence indicated possible Iranian intentions to target American citizens or facilities in the Gulf and Iraq – that any Iranian attack on "U.S. interests or those of its partners (would) be met with unrelenting force." Iran responded exactly one week later with attacks on four tankers berthed off the UAE coastline; two days later, the Saudi East-West pipeline was hit by explosive-bearing drones, later determined to have been launched by one of Iran's closest proxies in Iraq, Kata'ib Hezballah. Thus ensued months of thinly-veiled attacks by Iran – on a U.S. drone, on Saudi oil pipelines, on foreign tankers, and most spectacularly on Sept 14, on the heart of the Saudi energy enterprise in Abqaiq.

The Administration's responses throughout these months were contradictory and confusing. Secretary Pompeo made an early trip to Baghdad to warn Iraqi leaders – who we can be certain passed this message immediately to Tehran – that the U.S. would respond immediately, forcefully to any move against an American citizen. But this warning – and U.S. non-response to the series of Iranian attacks against Gulf partners, international shipping, even to the downing of a U.S. drone -- had the ironic effect of so strictly de-limiting what would be "off limits" that it appears Tehran boldly calculated it could land a strategic strike on Saudi Arabia and bear little risk of reprisal. This calculation was borne out, in fact.

In the aftermath of Soleimani's death and Iran's for-now limited response, the question for Washington's Gulf partners remains unanswered – does the U.S. security umbrella extend to them? If Iran returns to attacks on shipping or energy infrastructure, will the U.S. respond – and if so, how? If Saudi Arabia suffers a further, more devastating attack, what then?

Conclusion

Americans are pressed by the events of the last two weeks to ask: why do Iran's activities in the Gulf or in Iraq, via proxies or directly, matter for U.S. homeland security?

Number one: Oil: notwithstanding the new U.S. role as an energy mega-producer, oil remains a global commodity, its price affected directly by security – or insecurity -- in the Persian Gulf, carrying a knock-on effect on global economic health, including our own. The Administration appears uncertain about how much longer the U.S. should wear the mantle of ensuring the free and unconstrained flow of energy and commerce in the Persian Gulf. Iran picked up on that ambivalence, as did our Gulf partners.

Number Two: Counter-terrorism: Our ability to pursue robust counter-terrorism efforts in concert with dependable allies goes directly to our security at home. Whether we will be able to sustain a critical capability-building mission for Iraqi security forces, benefit in intelligence-sharing and gathering from being there on the ground, and help direct efforts to drive toward an enduring defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria are now very much in question. ISIS cell attacks in Iraq alone numbered nearly 900 in 2019. And if we are compelled – or choose -- to pull US trainers from Iraq, sustaining them in Syria is likely to be impossible. In the same vein, the relations of trust and confidence and influence that we sustain with our Gulf partners are critical to CT efforts by/through/with their policymakers, intelligence, defense and finance officials.

Number Three: Regional stability: Karim Sadjapour aptly noted this week Qassem Soleimani's "sinister genius" in marshalling both Sunni and Shia extremists to bring a wrecking ball early on to the U.S. project in Iraq, then building out "a foreign legion" to expand Iran's influence far across the Arab Middle East. Soleimani's terrible legacy – constructing parallel institutions to the state that suborn and overpower it, and follow foreign direction -- is vividly on display in Iraq. It is a recipe for chronic instability and insecurity across a widening arc of territory that is home to nearly 70 million people; home to the globe's fourth largest oil producer, source of a global extremist scourge, source of more than 8 million refugees.

What should the U.S. do? Navigating the turbulence besetting Iraq will be paramount, to ensure the critical U.S.-led Coalition counter-terrorism mission there can endure, and U.S. military trainers can operate safely. That will require more vigorous and more visible engagement from Washington, backstopping the tough work in which our ambassador and diplomatic staff in Baghdad and Erbil are engaged. And to be most effective, that effort should be robustly multilateral, drawing on the Coalition and the UN. Much has been made this past week on the Administration's support for Iran's protestors, but shockingly little attention has been spared for Iraqis who have suffered and died for more than 3 months to press

many of the same demands. Washington should unequivocally signal support for the protestors across Iraq seeking a new government, via early, clean elections; those same protestors have been the victims of Soleimani's militia project, targeted for assassination and brutal repression in the streets. Washington should focus its pressure, with targeted sanctions on both the senior government officials and the militia commanders responsible for the repression.

While the Administration has asserted that "deterrence has been restored" with Soleimani's death, it is fair to ask when it was lost. And deterrence, to be enduring and effective, cannot be built on a single action, however dramatic. The U.S. security umbrella for the Persian Gulf is well tattered, and an honest discussion between the U.S. and its partners on how to restore it – including what that requires of our quarreling partners – is long overdue.

Finally, it goes without saying that the time for vigorous diplomatic work is also upon us, lest the U.S. and Iran simply return to what I think of as a 40-year long frequently violent non-relationship. The asymmetrical threats to U.S. interests and security, to those of our friends in the region, that Qassem Soleimani constructed in more than two decades of dedicated work will not be undone through economic sanctions alone, nor do they lend themselves for the most part to a military response.

As Ariane Tabatabai wrote in 2019, "One thing the Iranians do not lack is options. The regime can use the (threat network) as a strike force to further its foreign policy goals in the region." The U.S., too, has a range of options to contend with any of the threats to homeland security – indirect or otherwise -- that Iran considers over the months ahead. One of the most important options for the Administration to exercise now is diplomacy, even as we keep economic, cyber, covert and conventional military tools at the ready to contain, deter and disrupt Iranian resort to asymmetrical warfare. As the dust settles on the two matching "black swan" events of the last two weeks – the most consequential U.S. strike on a foreign government official in modern times, and the first conventional Iranian attack on U.S. forces since the Iran-Iraq war – it is time to turn swiftly to identify the channel and the pathway to negotiations.