

**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 1”

July 27, 2011

Good afternoon. I want to welcome all of my colleagues to this hearing of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia. Since taking office, the Obama Administration’s policy toward Iran and Syria has been characterized chiefly by its engagement with the ruling regimes.

Whether or not that was the right policy at the time, the situation we face today with respect to these two countries is vastly different than it was in January 2009.

Just over two years ago, the regime in Tehran perpetrated one of the most blatant incidents of electoral fraud in recent history. This sparked widespread pro-democracy protests and the people of Iran took to the streets by the thousands to demand that their most basic rights be respected. What followed made very clear, however, that this regime is not interested in the rights or well-being of its citizens. The world watched as the Iranian regime beat, tortured, raped, and murdered its way through these protests.

It is perhaps even more horrifying to consider that many of these abuses are still occurring nearly two years later. The Iranian regime has been carrying out what former U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Mark Wallace, has called, “one of the great human rights tragedies of the modern era.” Most notable is the incredible number of executions which, by some estimates, now exceeds 140 people, including children—a violation of international law. That this regime continues to claim legitimacy under the auspices of democratic elections is an insult not only to the people of Iran, but to all those true democracies around the world whose governments actually do reflect the will of their peoples.

Just over 6 months ago, Syria, the Iranian regime’s closest ally in the region, joined Tehran in its ruthlessly 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 1,800 Syrians have been killed, over 10,000 have been jailed, approximately 30,000 have been internally displaced, and nearly 12,000 fled to neighboring Turkey where over 8,500 remain. Reports coming out of Syria speak of unconscionably heinous human rights abuses: snipers targeting protesters; residents—including children and the elderly—being rounded up; beatings; the use of electric shock to the genitals; and torture of children to name just several of the witnessed actions by the Assad regime. I want to condemn in the strongest possible terms both the actions of these regimes as well as the regimes themselves. These regimes together form an axis of abuse whose wanton disrespect for even the most basic human rights is undeniable.

Today’s hearing, however, was called to examine U.S. policy. My concern lays not so much with what the Administration has done as with what it has not done. The Obama Administration’s

human rights policies toward 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. This begs the question of how many people have to be tortured or die before the Administration is willing to call these regimes what they are: not only illegitimate but depraved.

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 puts it in an untenable position and, from the outside, appears it to be hedging rather than leading. And although the Administration may think that to do so puts itself in a strategically 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 the regimes in Tehran and Damascus. Words, like many things, have a currency, and that currency is action. To highlight human rights abuses and then sanction fewer than a dozen individuals in each country respectively is unacceptable. To vacillate between condemning these regimes and then later offering a lifeline should they reform pits us against the people of those countries.

The Administration must realize two things: First, making no decision is in fact a decision in and of itself and second, no matter who ultimately prevails, the U.S. can no longer do business with these regimes. They are beyond salvation.