

Ambassador Nathan Sales

Remarks at the Iran Human Rights and Democracy Conference

July 10, 2021

Thank you very much. It's a great pleasure to join you all at this year's Iran Human Rights and Democracy Conference. I'd like to thank the tens of thousands of people who are joining us virtually today from all around the world.

Most importantly, I'd like to thank the Iranian people – those who are watching inside Iran as well as the diaspora here in America and across the globe. For more than 40 years, you've stood up for democracy and liberty, confident that a better day is coming. Your example is an inspiration to all freedom loving peoples around the world.

I'm here to talk about terrorism – the Iranian regime's use of it, and what we can do about that.

Make no mistake: The Islamic Republic of Iran is the world's worst state sponsor of terrorism. Acting through the Revolutionary Guard Corps and countless terrorist proxies, the regime has murdered innocent civilians, taken countless hostages, and shed blood on a hideous scale, not just in the Middle East but around the world.

Why? Because, ultimately, the Islamic Republic is a revolutionary regime. It seeks to consolidate and export the revolution, and terrorism is one of its main tools for doing so. If you think you're on a divine mission, then laws against murder and extortion don't apply to you.

Let's take a brief tour.

In **Lebanon**, Iran has spent decades lavishly bankrolling the terrorist group Hizballah, building a corrupt state within a state that serves Tehran's interests and impoverishes the Lebanese people.

And when Hizballah isn't busy destroying Lebanon, its fighters are hard at work across the border propping up the brutal Assad dictatorship in Syria, greatly adding to the misery of the long-suffering Syrian people.

Hizballah is also the Iranian regime's most dangerous terrorist proxy, plotting deadly attacks in such far-flung places as Argentina, Bulgaria, and Cyprus. In the past few years, it has been caught stockpiling explosives in Western Europe, the Gulf, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere.

The regime must be proud of what it's done to Lebanon, because it's doing the same thing to other countries, building terrorist proxies that enforce Tehran's will from the barrel of a gun.

In **Iraq**, Iran-backed militias brazenly massacre peaceful protesters and assassinate public figures.

They also subject American soldiers and diplomats to a constant barrage of rocket fire. And now we're seeing reports that the regime has handed these militias sophisticated drones capable of evading defenses.

This all comes after Tehran gave terrorists advanced munitions that killed more than 600 American troops during the war.

In **Yemen**, the Iranian regime provides the Houthis with weapons they use to attack airports, energy infrastructure, and other civilian targets across the region while bringing the Yemeni people to the brink of famine.

Last December, the Houthis attempted a decapitation strike on the Yemeni government as its senior leadership arrived at Aden airport. They missed, but they did kill 22 innocent bystanders – including three humanitarian workers with the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Indeed, the Islamic Republic's reach extends far beyond the Middle East – as this group well knows.

In **Europe**, in 2018, an Iranian intelligence agent operating under diplomatic cover orchestrated an elaborate plot to bomb this very event taking place near Paris. This hits home for many people who are watching this event today as you were yourselves targets of this terrorist plot. Fortunately, this diplomat has now been convicted in a Belgian court and is serving a 20 year prison sentence.

Nor is the **United States** immune. Since 2017, the FBI has arrested three suspected Hizballah operatives on American soil. Two of them were casing potential targets in New York City, including the Statue of Liberty and Rockefeller Center; another conducted surveillance on the Panama Canal.

But it's important to remember that the first victims of the Iranian regime's terrorism are the Iranian people themselves. For decades, the IRGC has looted the Iranian economy, corruptly enriching itself at the people's expense. The regime's henchmen gun down peaceful protesters in the streets with impunity. Its torture chambers brutalize ordinary Iranians for exercising their fundamental rights to free speech and assembly.

And now the regime is doubling down on its crimes against humanity. It has used a sham election to install a butcher as president – Ebrahim Raisi, a man whose hands are stained with the blood of thousands of his countrymen.

So what do we do about it?

That's a big question, but I think that any policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran has to begin with a simple principle.

First, do no harm.

What that means is, at a minimum, don't hand the regime resources it will use to support terrorism around the world. Don't hand the regime resources it will use to further entrench itself and violently suppress those who are calling for change.

We know that terrorism sanctions work. Sanctions deny terrorists the money they need to plot attacks.

Consider Hizballah.

Since 2017, 14 countries have joined the United States in sanctioning or banning Hizballah in its entirety – rejecting the fantasy that the group has a peaceful “political wing” we can do business with.

For years, Hizballah could count on its patrons in Tehran to provide it with upwards of \$700 million a year. But after America and our allies turned up the heat, the money dried up. Hizballah's leader was reduced to going on TV and pleading for donations.

In 2019, the United States sanctioned the IRGC for supporting terrorism. That same year, we sanctioned Ebrahim Raisi for decades of appalling human rights violations, including his role in the 1988 “death commission” that slaughtered thousands of political prisoners.

Remember: The point of sanctions is to change behavior. Until Tehran changes its behavior, those sanctions need to stay in place.

In closing, I want to speak directly to the Iranian people.

There is no quarrel between the United States and the people of Iran. We seek friendship, and we know that you’re not responsible for the crimes committed by your self-appointed “leaders.” The American people will always support you in your pursuit of freedom and democracy.

Because we know that the Iranian people deserve better than the Iranian regime.

The Iranian people deserve a government that’s accountable to them at the ballot box.

They deserve a government that respects human rights and the rule of law.

They deserve a government that doesn’t murder peaceful protesters in broad daylight.

They deserve a government that’s led by statesmen, not criminals.

They deserve a government that’s at peace with its neighbors.

And above all, the Iranian people deserve a government that doesn’t plunder their wealth to support terrorism and bloodshed around the world.

To our Iranian friends, the American people know that your cause is just, and we will always stand with you as you fight to determine your own future. Thank you.