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Hagel, Kerry, and Brennan Confirmation Hearings: Middle East and North Africa Issues

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The United States Senate will soon hold confirmation hearings for the Obama Administration's nominees for three key positions: Senator John Kerry (D-MA) for Secretary of State, former Senator Chuck Hagel (R-NE) for Secretary of Defense, and White House Chief Counterterrorism Advisor John Brennan for Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The confirmation process gives the Senate the opportunity to examine the qualifications of the appointees, explore the likely trajectory of the Obama Administration's foreign policy and national security policy during its second term, and seek guarantees from the appointees that they will safeguard vital U.S. national interests on key issues.

A Crucial Region. The Middle East and North Africa are critical

focal points for efforts to halt Iran's nuclear program and its export of terrorism, the war against al-Qaeda, and the uphill struggle for freedom in countries affected by the so-called Arab Spring. The region also contains almost two-thirds of the world's proven oil reserves. In addition, important allies such as Israel, Iraq, Jordan, and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council are cooperating in containing Iran, mitigating the destabilizing spillover effects of Syria's intensifying civil war, and fighting Islamist extremism and terrorism.

The Obama Administration, after reversing the hard-line policies of the Bush Administration in confronting state sponsors of terrorism, vainly sought to engage hostile regimes in Iran and Syria, only to be spurned. The Administration distanced itself from Israel, America's foremost ally in the Middle East, and tilted towards the Palestinian Authority in U.S.-sponsored peace negotiations, which quickly broke down after Washington unwisely elevated the issue of Israeli settlements. The Administration also withdrew U.S. troops from Iraq, failing to arrange for a small residual force as it had promised—a failure that has undermined Iraq's security, jeopardized its

political stability, and contributed to the resurgence of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

There are three key issues that loom large in the coming months:

Iran's Nuclear Challenge. Despite sanctions, Iran has accelerated its uranium enrichment efforts. This year Tehran is expected to cross a dangerous threshold to gain a nuclear breakout capability by producing enough weapons-grade uranium to build a nuclear bomb. It will finish the job unless it is persuaded that the costs of doing so exceed the benefits of attaining a nuclear capability. Sanctions alone are unlikely to halt Iran's nuclear program, just as they failed to halt North Korea's. U.S. diplomacy must be bolstered by the credible threat of military force or Tehran will run out the clock.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has warned that Israel will be forced to take military action against Iran's nuclear program by mid-year if current trends continue. Strong and resolute U.S. leadership is necessary to resolve the nuclear issue before Israel is compelled to launch a preventive strike or Iran gains a nuclear capability. Also worrisome is Tehran's increasingly aggressive use of terrorism against Israeli and Saudi targets, including a foiled 2011 plot to bomb a

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Washington, D.C., restaurant to kill the Saudi Ambassador. The Obama Administration must apply maximum pressure to Tehran to deter it from continuing such terrorist acts.

Syria's Meltdown. The Obama Administration's naïve engagement of President Bashar al-Assad's barbaric dictatorship, as well as its wishful thinking about the possibility of inducing Assad to negotiate a political transition that would inevitably threaten his own survival has contributed to an increasingly bloody civil war. The outsourcing of policy on Syria to the U.N. Security Council has handed Russia and China a veto over U.S. policy and bolstered Assad's staying power.

U.S. passivity has contributed to a widening regional crisis. The Obama Administration must become more active in accelerating the fall of Assad, supporting the opposition, and working closely with Syria's neighbors to contain the destabilizing spillover effects and ease the suffering of Syrian refugees. It should identify key non-Islamist opposition leaders inside Syria who are worth supporting and provide them with effective economic aid, medical supplies, communications technology, and even covert arms aid if they can provide ironclad guarantees that the arms will not fall into the hands of terrorists.

Terrorism: A Resurgent Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremists have exploited the Arab Spring to expand their power. This has created direct threats such as yesterday's terrorist attack and hostage taking in Algeria and the September 11 attack that killed four Americans in Benghazi, Libya. It also has enabled terrorists to carve out sanctuaries in Mali, Syria, Yemen, and Egypt's Sinai peninsula. Al-Qaeda also has staged

a resurgence in Iraq after the withdrawal of U.S. troops and is poised to make a comeback in Afghanistan if the Obama Administration risks a precipitous drawdown of U.S. troops there.

Washington must undertake effective and responsible counter-terrorism cooperation with as many states as possible to defeat al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and other Islamist extremists. But in failed or failing states where the rule of law is nonexistent, the Obama Administration's law enforcement approach is dangerously ineffective. The Benghazi attack and the faltering investigation to identify and arrest the culprits has underscored the weaknesses of this approach, which also failed to protect Americans from the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Clarity and Guarantees on Important Issues. The Senate should use the confirmation process to question each nominee on the above mentioned issues. In particular, it should seek guarantees from Senator Kerry that he will:

- **Maximize pressure on Iran to halt its nuclear program and export of terrorism.** Kerry should commit to supporting the use of force if Iran continues to drag its feet on the nuclear issue, as well as maintaining sanctions until Tehran has taken concrete actions to halt uranium enrichment, transfer its stockpile of medium enriched uranium out of the country, and dismantle its fortified Fordo enrichment facility.
- **Accelerate the transition to a post-Assad Syria.** Kerry has been a leading advocate of engaging the Syrian dictator, which yielded no real benefits. He should commit to ousting the tyrant and

replacing him as soon as possible with an inclusive successor government committed to democracy and opposed to terrorism.

The Senate should seek guarantees from Senator Hagel that he will:

- **Fully support Israel if it attacks Iran's nuclear program in self-defense.** Hagel has advocated some of the same fuzzy engagement policies that failed to yield results for the Administration over the past four years. Coercive diplomacy is needed, backed by the strongest possible sanctions and the credible threat of military action. But Hagel has opposed both in the past. He must establish that he is willing to support Israel's inherent right to self defense and lead U.S. military strikes against Iran's nuclear infrastructure if called upon to do so by the President.
 - **Support close strategic cooperation with Israel.** Hagel has a history of perceived slights against Israel. He must commit to strengthening military cooperation with Jerusalem, which could pay dividends in containing Iran and fighting terrorism.
- The Senate should seek guarantees from John Brennan that he will:
- **Maintain maximum lethal pressure on al-Qaeda.** The impending drawdown of U.S. troops in Afghanistan could undermine efforts to strike at al-Qaeda leaders who have taken refuge inside Pakistan. Brennan should commit to maintaining the infrastructure necessary to support targeted CIA strikes by drones and other means long after

most U.S. troops have returned home.

Stronger Leadership Needed in Second Term. Given the Administration's feckless record on Middle East policy in its first term, a more realistic and proactive approach is needed to confront hostile regimes in Iran and Syria while helping to protect U.S. allies in the region. Both allies and adversaries are uncertain about the Obama Administration's goals and resolve.

The three nominees must convince the Senate, the American people, allies, and adversaries that they have a realistic understanding of how to protect America's vital interests in the volatile Middle East.

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