



4 Key Takeaways From Director Of National Intelligence Dan Coats Testimony About Iran

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Late last month, America's top spymaster, Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats, testified before the Congress regarding global threats confronting the country. His statement for the record — which doubles as the intelligence's community's most recent "worldwide threat assessment" — provides an extensive overview of the risks that the U.S. will face in the near future, from deepening Chinese authoritarianism to the proliferation of "disruptive technologies" like artificial intelligence.

But the survey is valuable for another reason as well. It provides us with a detailed snapshot of the challenge that America's spies and intelligence professionals see emanating from Iran. Herewith, a quartet of key takeaways:

-- Iran is adopting an increasingly aggressive regional posture in the Middle East. Over the past several years, the Iranian regime has parlayed the economic benefits of its 2015 nuclear deal with the West into an ambitious national military modernization program. It has also become more and more capable of interfering with regional commerce and transit from its strategic position atop the Strait of Hormuz — a key waterway through which roughly one-fifth of the world's oil passes. These trends, the U.S. intelligence community believes, will continue and even accelerate in the near future.

"Iran continues to develop, improve, and field a range of military capabilities that enable it to target US and allied military assets in the region and disrupt traffic through the Strait of Hormuz," the study notes. "These systems include ballistic missiles, unmanned explosive boats, naval mines, submarines and advanced torpedoes, armed and attack UAVs, antiship and land-attack cruise missiles, antiship ballistic missiles, and air defenses." Those growing capabilities will give the Iranian regime even more ability to control maritime traffic in the Strait, "should Iran seek to project an image of strength in response to US pressure," the study warns.

-- Iran represents a growing cyber danger to the United States. "Iran uses increasingly sophisticated cyber techniques to conduct espionage," the DNI report lays out. "[I]t is also attempting to deploy cyber attack capabilities that would enable attacks against critical infrastructure in the United States and allied countries." That assessment tracks with the findings of cybersecurity firms like Mandiant, which have warned publicly that Iran is a burgeoning cyber superpower. And from the intelligence community's assessment, it's clear that those growing capabilities are arrayed squarely against American interest. "Iran has been preparing for cyber attacks against the United States and our allies," the study lays out bluntly, and "is capable of causing localized, temporary disruptive effects — such as disrupting a large company's corporate networks for days to weeks."

Chances of Israel-Iran conflict are getting higher

-- The risks of an Iranian-Israeli conflict in the near future are high — and getting higher. Iran, the report notes, has become deeply entrenched in Syria over the past half-decade, and is now seeking to translate those gains "into long-term political, security, social, and economic influence" there. This, in turn, has brought Iran into direct military conflict with Israel, which has watched Iran's growing presence on its northern border with mounting worry, and there is now "growing concern" within the U.S. intelligence community that "the long-term trajectory of Iranian influence in the region" will cause the conflict to escalate. The unspoken subtext to this conclusion is that the situation is likely to get substantially worse if the Trump administration follows through with the President's pledge to withdraw American troops from Syria, thereby removing the reassuring presence they provide.

-- Iran is on a collision course with the United States and its allies. "Iran's regional ambitions and improved military capabilities almost certainly will threaten US interests in the coming year," the report concludes. This trajectory, according to the intelligence community, is driven by a number of factors, from an increasingly hardline political status quo within Iran to "Tehran's perception of increasing US, Saudi, and Israeli hostility." Indeed, the study concludes, the Iranian regime appears to be as committed as ever to confronting the West in Syria, in Yemen, and through its long-standing support for international terrorism — and now has greater capability to do so than ever before.

These findings have been largely overshadowed by another of the report's conclusions — that Iran remains largely in compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal — which has prompted President Trump's ire. But the intelligence community's assessment of Iran's growing strategic capabilities and increasingly confrontational regional posture is the real story, and leads serious readers to an inexorable conclusion: that Washington needs to brace itself for greater conflict with Tehran.