

# ParsBrief

Number 86

May 2015

1. Congressional invite to MEK sparks furious backlash
2. Benjamin Helped Delist Mojahedin Khalq. That Doesn't Mean He Wants to Testify With Them
3. Why Is Congress Listening to an Ex-Terrorist Iranian Cult Leader?
4. Not The Onion: Tom Cotton Befriends Radical Marxist Muslim Cult
5. Poe's Financial Ties To MEK May Explain Maryam's House Testimony
6. Mojahedin Khalq (MEK) Lobby in European Parliament fails to deliver.



### Congressional invite to MEK sparks furious backlash

By Julian Pecquet , al-monitor.com , April 28 2015

A House panel's invitation to the leader of an Iranian dissident group has caused a furious backlash from former State Department officials who refuse to testify along with her.

Former State Department officials are refusing to testify alongside Mujahedeen-e-Khalq leader Maryam Rajavi.

Former ambassador to Syria Robert Ford and ex-counterterrorism coordinator Daniel Benjamin told Al-Monitor that they did not want to give a platform to the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq (MEK), a group that the United States considered a terrorist organization until three years ago. Ford said he would not testify at the same time as Maryam Rajavi, while Benjamin has pulled out altogether from Wednesday's terrorism subcommittee hearing on the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS).

"The committee handled this abysmally," Ford told Al-Monitor in a phone call late Monday.

"What the fuck do the MEK know about the Islamic State?"

Ford said he got the committee to agree to host Rajavi on a second panel after other witnesses testify as a condition for his participation. She is set to appear via teleconference from Paris, where the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), an umbrella group of Iranian opposition groups that includes the MEK, has its headquarters in exile.

Benjamin, who helped delist the MEK while serving as coordinator for counterterrorism in 2009-2012 under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, called the invitation from panel chairman Ted Poe, R-Texas, "disgraceful." The MEK is widely believed to have been added to the terrorism list under President Bill Clinton as a goodwill gesture to reinforce the relatively moderate presidency of Mohammad Khatami, and the NCRI has since spent millions of dollars lobbying to get it delisted and boost its standing on Capitol Hill.

Benjamin told committee staff that he "did not believe the MEK had anything to contribute to a discussion of [IS], and that this would be a distraction from an important issue," he told Al-Monitor. "I said the story of the day would be the rehabilitation of the MEK, and I did not want to be associated with that in any way."

Poe has defended his invitation to Rajavi, which Al-Monitor first reported last week, saying hundreds of MEK members who remain at Camp Liberty in Baghdad could be at risk of being massacred by IS militants. Proponents of regime change in Iran have applauded the invitation, calling Rajavi and the NCRI a viable, democratic alternative to both Sunni and Shiite Islamists.

"Is Maryam Rajavi the right person to testify?" asked Raymond Tanter, who served on the National Security Council under President Ronald Reagan, at the conservative website Townhall.com. "She is the right person: As a pro-democracy woman with a moderate view of Islam, Rajavi represents the opposite of the misogynous Iranian regime's rulers; they are authoritarian, suppress women and hold an extreme view of Islam."

The MEK did not respond to a request for comment.

Its defenders say the decades-old allegations against the group are misinformed and rely excessively on propaganda from Tehran.

"Now freed from the restrictions and stigma of [the terrorist] designation, the MEK's members and supporters will have the opportunity to contest not only the factual record but assessments dismissive of the group's political potential," Lincoln Bloomfield, a former State and Defense Department official, wrote in a 2013 book about the MEK. "Their first and obvious point will be that no one knows how Iranians would vote in a free and open election."

Bloomfield and other MEK defenders argue that MEK attacks against Iranian targets were a form of legitimate armed resistance against a religious dictatorship, and that the killings of a half-dozen American citizens inside Iran in the 1970s were carried out by factions with no connection to the current leadership. They point out that support for the MEK within Iran is impossible to gauge since advocating on its behalf is punishable by death.

The group's detractors, of which there are many among current and former State Department officials, think banking on the MEK is delusional. They say the MEK is little more than a Rajavi cult and that supporting it publicly undermines pro-democracy activists within Iran.

"Although I participated in and supported the decision to delist the MEK as a Foreign Terrorist Organization — in part because of real humanitarian concerns about the plight of its members in Iraq — I continue to have serious concerns about the group," Benjamin told

Al-Monitor in an email. "No one can seriously dispute that the MEK has plenty of American blood on its hands. In addition to killing US civilians and military personnel, participating in the 1979 takeover of the US Embassy in Tehran and serving as a strike force for Saddam Hussein, the group treats its own member abysmally and coercively."

Barbara Slavin contributed to this report

## Benjamin Helped Delist Mojahedin Khalq. That Doesn't Mean He Wants to Testify With Them

David Francis, Foreign Policy, April 28 2015

Former State Official Helped Delist the MEK As a Terror Threat. That Doesn't Mean He Wants to Testify With Them.

Controversial Iranian dissidents group may no longer be considered by the U.S. as a terror threat. But it has spooked a former State Department counterterror official who is refusing to testify at a House hearing where the group's leader will also speak.

The April 29 hearing, in front of a House subcommittee on terrorism and nonproliferation, will focus on the threat from the Islamic State, which has overrun much of Syria and Iraq. Among the invited speakers is Maryam Rajavi, president of the Paris-based National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), which is the umbrella organization for groups that include Mujahedeen-e-Khalq (MEK).

Until 2012, the MEK was on the State Department's terrorism list for killing six Americans in the 1970s. For years, the MEK — which has been likened to a cult — filled campaign coffers of numerous lawmakers while paying steep speaking fees to officials like former Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell and former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who were paid up to \$30,000 for speeches supporting the MEK — which is dedicated to overthrowing Iran's clerical regime.

Daniel Benjamin, formerly the State Department's counterterror coordinator, also was slated to testify at the House hearing. But on Monday, Benjamin declared that "I will not appear at a hearing" about the Islamic State with the MEK's defacto leader, because "I know of no substantive expertise that the MEK has developed on ISIS." News of Benjamin's cancellation was first mentioned on Twitter by ALM Congress Pulse.

In an email to Foreign Policy, Benjamin noted that the MEK's "exclusive focus" of concern has for decades been Iran. "So one has to wonder what the purpose of Rajavi's presence

on this panel is,” said Benjamin, who is now director of an international studies program at Dartmouth University.

“Being delisted as a Foreign Terrorist Organization — a decision I took part in — doesn’t mean that this group ... has suddenly ... become trustworthy or worthy of engagement,” he said.

Rep. Brad Sherman (D-Calif.), who sits on the House panel, disputed that, and said the group should no longer be vilified since it is no longer on the U.S. list of foreign terror threats.

“Former is former,” Sherman told FP Monday afternoon, referring to the State Department list. He said the group helped uncover Iran’s secretive nuclear facility at Natanz.

However, other claims by the group have been less reliable. The Obama administration believed the MEK was providing misinformation in an effort to derail recent nuclear talks with Iran. During negotiations MEK insisted Tehran was building underground nuclear facilities, an assertion dismissed by the State Department.

The MEK did not return multiple requests for comment. It last drew widespread attention in Washington in 2013, when members of the group were trapped at Camp Ashraf in Iraq. American supporters of the group sent a letter to President Barack Obama urging him to help the MEK members escape “premeditated mass murder planned at the highest level and executed by Iraqi forces and agents, using equipment and training provided by U.S. forces.”

Sherman also dismissed Benjamin’s rationale for pulling out of his appearance — that MEK had nothing to offer on the Islamic State threat.

“If people pulled out of hearings just because they thought the witnesses’ expertise was on a related issue but not on the official title of the hearing, we’d have a lot of empty chairs,” he said.

### Why Is Congress Listening to an Ex-Terrorist Iranian Cult Leader?

Joshua Keating, slate.com, April 30, 2015

In what one member of Congress called a “historic hearing” yesterday, Maryam Rajavi, leader of the controversial Iranian dissident group Mujahedeen-e-Khalq, or MEK, testified via satellite before a congressional subcommittee on the threats posed by ISIS and Iran, which she sees as one and the same. The MEK is considered a dangerous cult by many, and until three years ago was labeled a terrorist organization by the U.S. government. But

after years of concerted lobbying, it enjoys a surprising amount of support on Capitol Hill. And yesterday the MEK displayed its growing influence in U.S. foreign policy debates.

Joshua Keating

It's been a long and winding road for the MEK. Ideologically, the MEK originally sought to fuse revolutionary Marxism with Islam, but it has largely abandoned that rhetoric today for something more palatable to Western supporters. The group was formed in the 1960s by leftist Iranian students opposed to the Shah's regime. During the 1970s it carried out attacks that killed several Americans working on defense projects in Iraq, and supported the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in 1979. After the Iranian Revolution, the group fell out with the new Islamic state and went underground, carrying out a series of high-profile attacks against the Iranian government while its leaders fled to Paris. During the 1980s and 1990s, the MEK fought as a private militia on behalf of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

But things changed after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, when the MEK renounced violence (after being disarmed by the American military) and cast itself as supporters of the democratic opposition in Iran. Not everyone bought the group's transformation into defenders of liberty, secularism, and women's equality. Critics say the group began to transform into a cult centered around its leaders, the married couple Massoud and Maryam Rajavi, after the Iran-Iraq War, when thousands of its fighters were killed.

In 2003, New York Times reporter Elizabeth Rubin visited the group's Iraqi compound at Camp Ashraf and described it as resembling a "fictional world of female worker bees ... dressed exactly alike, in khaki uniforms and mud-colored head scarves, driving back and forth in white pickup trucks, staring ahead in a daze as if they were working at a factory in Maoist China." Followers at Ashraf were reportedly cut off from the outside media, required to attend regular self-criticism sessions, and barred from personal friendships and emotional relationships.

But the group played its cards well as Western concerns grew over Iran's nuclear program, reportedly passing information from its supporters within the Islamic Republic on nuclear facilities to the U.S. and, according to some reports, cooperating with Mossad to assassinate Iranian scientists. It also began a multiyear, multimillion-dollar lobbying campaign to remove itself from the terrorist list, including paying American figures like Rudy Giuliani and Howard Dean to give speeches on its behalf. It worked, and in 2012, Hillary Clinton took the MEK off the list.

Since then, the group's influence has been growing. Its supporters regularly crowd hearings on Capitol Hill dealing with Iran and its increasing influence in Iraq. The Iraqi government has long viewed the MEK with hostility and has carried out several brutal

attacks on its compound. U.S. officials also believe Iranian troops participated in a 2013 attack that killed at least 50 MEK members in 2013. One of its staunchest supporters on Capitol Hill, Sen. Robert Menendez of New Jersey, held up a planned arms sale to former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government in part over concerns about the treatment of the MEK.

Ted Poe, R-Texas, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade, which held Wednesday's hearing, is another prominent MEK backer. Shaylyn Hynes, a spokeswoman for Poe, told me by email that Rajavi has a "long history of speaking against what she calls 'Islamic fundamentalism,'" and "can speak to how ISIS' ideology is both similar to and different from the mullahs leading Iran." Asked if there were any concerns given the MEK's history, Hynes replied, "the administration does not consider them a terrorist group and neither do we."

Rajavi was certainly feeling the love from Congress on Wednesday, testifying before an overflow crowd at the hearing, which was titled "ISIS: Defining the Enemy." Rep. Brad Sherman, D-California, compared her appearance to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's address to Congress that day, noting that Japan had also once been an enemy of the United States. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas, is not a member of the subcommittee but dropped in to refer to Rajavi as a "great leader."

Still, not everyone was as welcoming. Former State Department counterterrorism director Daniel Benjamin, who had been scheduled to testify, dropped out of the hearing rather than appear with Rajavi. Another, former ambassador to Syria and prominent administration critic Robert Ford, told Foreign Policy he was "shocked" to learn she was on the panel and demanded that the subcommittee "put me on a panel without the MEK or I wouldn't appear." He wound up speaking earlier in the day.

Suspect groups playing on American naiveté by telling gullible politicians exactly what they want to hear. Anybody remember that great band Ahmed Chalabi and the Iraqi Expatriates? They sure were reliable sources, weren't they... More...

In her appearance, via satellite from Paris, Rajavi made a case familiar to anyone who listened to Benjamin Netanyahu's speech to Congress in March: that ISIS and Iran are two sides of the same coin, despite the fact that Iranian-backed militias are fighting the group in Iraq. "The Mullahs regime is not part of any solution to the current crisis. Instead, it is the heart of the problem," she said, referring to the Iranian government as the "Godfather of ISIS." She referred to the current fight between ISIS and Iran as merely an "internal power struggle" within Islamic fundamentalism and warned that "fundamentalism of the Shiite

kind is more dangerous than the Sunni one” because Shiites already have a state, Iran, which is projecting its power in Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere.

While the support for Rajavi was a bipartisan affair, her message seemed to resonate in particular with critics of the Obama administration’s Iran policy. Hynes denied to me that the timing of the hearing had anything to do with the ongoing debate over nuclear diplomacy and Iran sanctions, saying “There is no relation. Ms. Rajavi is an expert on radical Islamist extremism and is being called to testify in that capacity.” Still, Rep. Lee Zeldin, R-New York,, who praised Rajavi and the MEK as the legitimate democratic opposition of Iran, said during the hearing that when he listens to the administration’s rhetoric on the Iranian regime, “I honestly do not know if my president is on the same team as I am.”

#### Not The Onion: Tom Cotton Befriends Radical Marxist Muslim Cult

Nick Hankoff, [VoicesofLiberty.com](http://VoicesofLiberty.com), May 8, 2015

How badly does Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) want to squander a deal with Iran over its civilian nuclear program? Bad enough to become the fastest rising star of the neoconservative wing of the Republican Party, yes, but this week the freshman senator went even further than sending a letter to the Iranian government.

On Wednesday, Cotton participated in a panel called “After Iran Nuclear Framework Agreement, Now What?” organized by the Organization of Iranian American Communities (OIAC) in a Senate meeting room. The OIAC, through spending millions of dollars lobbying, is responsible for getting an Iranian dissident terrorist group removed from the State Department’s official list of terrorist organizations in 2012 by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

That would be the Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK), a group that assassinated half a dozen Americans in Iran and targeted many others in the run up to the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The MEK was founded with Marxist, feminist, and Islamic tenets and incorporated cultish tendencies including personality worship of its husband-wife founders, forced divorces for elderly women, and a forbiddance to marry for young women.

The revolutionary group considers itself a government-in-exile, ready to return to Iran once the current regime is overthrown. The MEK has no measure of support from the Iranian people.



Its possible Tom Cotton is (willfully?) ignorant to the leftist, tyrannical values and aspirations of the MEK. But like Howard Dean, Rick Perry, Rudy Giuliani, and many other politicians, there are big opportunities to work together for mutual political growth and enrichment.

Here's a tweet heralding the alliance between Cotton and the MEK-fronting OIAC:

For Cotton and the MEK, prospects of their shared enemy in Iran reaching a nuclear deal inspires outrageous rhetoric. The female co-founder of the MEK, Maryam Rajavi, has said that toppling the government in Iran is the best shot the US has at defeating the Islamic State. Cotton has said bombing Iran would last no longer than how long proponents of the 2003 Iraq War promised.

A little more on the MEK: Prior to giving themselves up to Americans in the immediate aftermath of the 2003 US invasion in Iraq, the group was financed by Saddam Hussein (remember the reason for invading, his support for terrorists?). Since then their anti-imperialist leanings have given way to promoting "human rights," and they've dropped their anti-Israel schtick for a partnership with the Mossad, Israel's secret intelligence service. Through American intelligence officers, NBC News and Seymour Hersh have each concluded that the MEK carried out assassinations on five Iranian nuclear scientists after training with Mossad.

Neocons and Marxist-Islamist terrorist cultists joining together to undermine US-led international negotiations to prevent war with Iran. Politics makes strange bedfellows.

### Poe's Financial Ties To MEK May Explain Maryam's House Testimony

Eli Clifton, Lobelog, April 28, 2015

Wednesday's scheduled congressional hearing on "ISIS: Defining the Enemy" is rapidly shrinking in size. Two key witnesses are refusing to attend due to the invitation to testify that Ted Poe (R-TX), the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, extended to Maryam Rajavi, leader of the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq (MEK).

Former U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford and former State Department counterterrorism director Daniel Benjamin have both said that they won't appear for the hearing after learning that Rajavi would also be a witness on the same panel. She is scheduled to participate via videoconference from Paris, the headquarters the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), a MEK front.

MEK, which the State Department removed from terrorism list in 2012 following a lengthy and expensive lobbying campaign, is believed to have been responsible for the killing of six Americans in Iran between 1973 and 1976.

The group, which went into exile after losing a violent power struggle in the early years of the Islamic Republic, aligned itself with Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war and, despite claims to being Iran's viable democratic government in exile, is widely believed to have little or no grassroots support in Iran. The group has long faced criticism from Iran specialists and rights groups such as Human Rights Watch that it has devolved into a cult based on devotion to Maryam and her long-missing husband, Massoud Rajavi. According to numerous accounts, the group exerts a high degree of control over its followers, going so far as to mandate divorces and celibacy for their soldiers.

But, as Ali Gharib and I documented in February, MEK's influence in Washington, particularly with Iran hawks, has coincided with a flow of money from the group to American politicians, in particular, to embattled Sen. Robert Menendez (D-NJ) who is currently under indictment on unrelated federal corruption charges.

So why did Poe and the Republican majority on the terrorism subcommittee decide to invite Rajavi (a copy of whose testimony was obtained by Ali who previewed it Tuesday on The Nation's website) Campaign finances may offer at least part of the answer.

Poe received \$17,900 in campaign contributions from supporters of the MEK between 2009 and 2014, according to an analysis I conducted of campaign finance data. Surprisingly, nearly half—or \$8,600—of the total flowed into his campaign while the group was still on the State Department's terrorism list between 2009 and its delisting in 2012.

In 2013 and 2014, the group also paid for \$19,671 in travel expenses (including business-class plane fare) for Poe's travel to MEK events in France.

In contrast, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), returned a \$2,600 campaign contribution from a MEK supporter in Virginia in 2013. "During routine due diligence by campaign staff, it was discovered that a few donors had associations the campaign was uncomfortable with," a spokesman for Graham's campaign told Politico. "In an abundance of caution, the contributions were refunded."

Poe seems less concerned about the association. His insistence on inviting Rajavi adds to the irony of his chairmanship of the terrorism subcommittee (shades of Sen. James Inhofe's chairmanship of the Senate Environment Committee).

With Ford and Benjamin out, Rajavi will be joined on Wednesday by only one other witness: Walid Phares, a pro-Israel Lebanese-American Maronite Christian with a long association with hard-line neo-conservatives and a terrorism "expert" for Fox News. During

Lebanon's civil war that raged from 1975 through the 1980's, Phares served as an ideologue for the Lebanese Forces, an umbrella group of various Christian militias. Some of these militias carried out the Sabra and Shatila massacres in September, 1982, in which at many as 3,000 Palestinians—mostly women, children and the elderly—were killed following Israel's conquest of Beirut. Among other positions, he served as co-chairman of the Middle East working group of Mitt Romney's foreign policy advisory team.

Mojahedin Khalq (MEK) Lobby in European Parliament fails to deliver.

Eldar Mamedov, Lobelog, May 18, 2015

In 2010, when Iran's then-minister of foreign affairs Manouchehr Mottaki visited the European Parliament in Brussels, he was greeted by protests from MPs. Some of them, known for their close links with the exiled Iranian dissident group Mojaheddeen-e Khalk (MEK), carried the picture of Neda Soltan, a young Iranian woman killed during the protests following the fraudulent presidential elections of 2009. They also tried to block the minister from entering the meeting room and even briefly scuffled with security guards.

The contrast with a visit of a delegation from the Iranian Majles to Brussels on May 6-7 could not be greater. Sure enough, the MEK tried to derail the visit by lobbying the MPs to adopt a resolution on capital punishment in Iran, which would have almost certainly led to the cancellation of the visit. When that plan failed, they called on Euro MPs to boycott the delegation.

In the end, however, the five member-strong delegation led by the leader of the "principlist" faction of the Majles Kazem Jalali did make it to Brussels, in the first such parliamentary visit in seven years. Apart from holding sessions with their counterparts from the EP delegation for relations with Iran, Majles members were received by the President of the EP Martin Schultz (a German Social Democrat) and the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee Elmar Brok (a German Christian Democrat).

### Regional Concerns

A growing realization of the converging interests between the EU and Iran accounts for this dramatic change. This time, the discussions in Brussels were not so much focused on traditional European concerns, such as Iran's nuclear program and human rights, as on the situation in the Middle East. In a scenario of rapidly disintegrating states and spreading

terrorist threats, European officials are discovering that Iran is among the most stable and predictable state actors in the region.

In fact, privately many of them are uneasy, to say the least, with Saudi Arabia's newfound regional efforts to consolidate a Sunni front against the "Iranian threat." In a curious twist, it is Saudi Arabia, and not Iran, that is increasingly emerging as a revolutionary Middle Eastern power. Its refusal to take up a seat in the UN Security Council in 2013, alleging the structure's inability to take action against Syria's president Bashar Assad and confront Iran, was already a harbinger. Now, many in Brussels view with apprehension the departure of the cautious King Abdullah and a newly assertive policy of rolling back "Iranian influence" in Yemen and Syria.

The EU's foreign policy supremo Federica Mogherini definitely doesn't share the Saudi narrative of Iran being the root of all tumult in the Middle East. In fact, she sees the nuclear deal with Iran as a gate opener for engaging Iran on the regional issues, including in Syria and Yemen, which is an anathema to Saudis. Officials from the Mogherini-led European External Action Service (EEAS) now discuss the possibility of a regional dialogue with Iran, which is a sharp departure from her predecessor Catherine Ashton, who approached Iran as an exclusively nuclear problem.

#### The Problem with the Gulf States

A major obstacle to this re-alignment is, of course, the position of some EU member states. Shortly before the group of Iranian MPs arrived in Brussels, French President Francois Hollande visited Saudi Arabia and Qatar, two major buyers of the French arms. As the French-Saudi joint declaration makes it clear, both countries are looking to consolidate their cooperation, notably in the defence sphere. This explains why France is also the toughest of the P5+1 group of powers in nuclear negotiations with Iran, its positions closest to the Saudis and Israelis. The French government, of course, is looking for ways to boost the country's struggling economy. But massive arms sales to the Gulf monarchies may carry a considerable strategic cost, namely in the fight against the so-called Islamic State (IS or ISIS) and al-Qaeda.

Iranian MPs are upset that no major steps have been taken to combat IS and al-Qaeda terrorism. There is some truth to these claims.

Although Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies are formally part of the anti-ISIS coalition, their real actions seem to go in an opposite direction. Operation "Decisive Storm" in Yemen contrasts sharply with Saudi Arabia's and its allies' notorious lack of enthusiasm in the fight against IS. Bombing Yemen (including with cluster munitions, which are prohibited by

international law) not only leads to numerous civilian deaths but also takes the heat off al-Qaeda, enabling it to regroup and liberate dangerous terrorists from prisons. And the anti-Shiite, anti-Christian, and anti-Jewish hate campaigns emanating from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates show no sign of abating. These countries are providing pulpits for firebrand clerics and hosting “debates” on the convenience of committing genocide against Alawites (a heterodox offshoot of Shia Islam), like the one organised by al-Jazeera Arabic in Doha.

Iranian MPs also rejected the interpretation of the current strife in the Middle East as a Sunni-Shiite conflict. They pointed out that Sunnis and Shiites have co-existed peacefully for centuries and blamed Saudi Arabia for stoking the sectarian conflict in the region through its aggressive promotion and financing of Wahhabism. Supporting Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies is, in this reading, a recipe for a strategic disaster in the region.

Overall, this narrative lacks self-criticism as regards Iran’s own role in region’s woes—from its staunch support of Bashar Assad’s regime in Syria to the failure to rein in more effectively Shiite militias in Iraq, some of which have been accused of war crimes. But that does not mean that the Iranian narrative should be rejected out of hand. If the West is serious about the security of the Middle East, and its own security as well, it would be wise to use its close ties with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf regimes to confront them over their destabilizing activities, even at the cost of some lucrative arms deals.

The visit of the Iranian MPs to Brussels is another sign of changing times in the Middle East. Although a wholesale rapprochement between the EU and Iran may still be some way off, inter-parliamentary diplomacy has the potential to build trust, bridge differences, and eventually make a re-alignment possible. There is a need for more, not less, of such contacts. US Congress members would do well to join their European counterparts in a direct dialogue with Iran. The West, after all, does not have the luxury of choice in picking its interlocutors in the Middle East these days.