

OPENING STATEMENT
SENATOR JOSEPH R. BIDEN, JR.
IRAN: SECURITY THREATS & U.S. POLICY
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Mr. Chairman, thank you for convening this hearing this important and timely hearing. Secretary Armitage, I look forward to your testimony. I know that, as always, you'll give us the unvarnished facts and, I hope a better understanding of the Administration's policy toward Iran.

Iran poses a vexing set of challenges to our security. It also holds the possibility of evolving in a more a positive direction. It's hard to argue about the geo-strategic importance of a country that shares long borders with Iraq and Afghanistan and sits in the heart of an oil-rich and politically turbulent region.

We have good reason to be suspicious about Iran. It continues to actively support Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. It refuses to surrender key al-Qaeda members who are in its custody. It has been developing a nuclear weapons program as well as a long-range missile capability. And, because it is one of the few countries with which we have no diplomatic ties and no regular dialogue, we have a tougher time understanding its intentions.

Yet, over the last several years, a reform movement has sought to alter Iran's policies. It has met with only limited success because of a hard-line establishment that refuses to follow the will of the Iranian people.

Just this month, the Nobel Committee awarded the Peace Prize to a courageous Iranian reformer who has been pushing for democratic change, especially the rights of women and children.

This has brought joy -- and hope -- to millions of her fellow country-men and women who seek greater freedom.

But we do have a profound stake in the outcome. And we should have a policy of hard-headed engagement with Iran to do what we can to promote positive Iranian policies without any illusions about our ability to profoundly affect the outcome.

When I was in the seat you now occupy Mr. Chairman, I extended, along with Senator Hagel, an invitation to meet anywhere, anytime with our colleagues in the Iranian parliament.

I was told that the offer itself generated the most intense discussion on ties with the United States within Iran in over two decades. Reformers in Iran welcomed the invitation, while hard-liners clearly felt threatened and condemned it loudly.

I am pleased that Dr. Rice, speaking for the President, has consistently and repeatedly supported the idea of a parliamentary dialogue.

In my speech, I recommended five specific steps: first, remove regulations that prevent private American groups from supporting the struggling democracy movement in Iran; second, discuss matters of possible mutual interest such as Afghanistan and Iraq; third, allow Iran to join the World Trade Organization to promote positive change; fourth, indirectly help Iran on refugee and narcotics matters where we share common interests; and fifth, encourage citizen exchanges.

Certainly there is a great deal to discuss with Iran.

Iranian reformers tell us that their interests in Iraq are “identical” to ours. They were one of the first to recognize the Governing Council. Others in the Iranian establishment take a more pernicious view of our presence. The question is, should we test Iran to see whether it is willing to promote stability in Iraq.

In Afghanistan, we can see the same kind of ambivalence. Iranians in the elected branch of the government worked closely with our officials during and after our military campaign. Others directed their support not to the central government but to friendly warlords. With the Taliban regrouping and warlordism on the rise, it makes sense to have a dialogue with Iran over matters related to Afghanistan.

At the same time, we must face the matters on which we have a fundamental disagreement – particularly terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Iran’s continuing support for terrorism will impede any improvement in relations, and its vagueness about al-Qaeda suspects it is holding is downright dangerous.

France, Germany, and the United Kingdom recently gained an agreement from Iran to suspend nuclear enrichment activities and to provide much more transparency about its nuclear program. Of course, Iran’s pledges will have to be tested. The Chairman, in fact, penned an op-ed last week with which I agree, where he called for “super inspections” that are even tougher than what we had in Iraq.

I look forward to hearing from you, Mr. Secretary, what our policy is toward the Iranian nuclear program and what diplomatic initiatives we will be working with our allies in Europe and with Russia.

Mr. Chairman, there is much more to be said, but let me conclude by saying that we do not have the luxury of ignoring the very real challenges and opportunities that are presented by Iran even as we find ourselves pre-occupied with Iraq, Afghanistan, the Israeli-Palestinian situation, the war on terrorism, and North Korea. That is a lot to have on your plate, when any one of these issues could be all-consuming.

Unfortunately, they are all inter-related and we ignore any one of them at our peril. But if we handle Iran well, success there could have a very beneficial spillover to the other challenges we face.

Thank you, and I look forward to your testimony.

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