

THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR IMPASSE: NEXT STEPS

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Senator Coburn, distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

It is a privilege to appear before you once again. Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the deepening international crisis over Iran's nuclear program and the policy options available to the United States.

The United States stands at a crossroads. Two months ago, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice articulated what amounted to a fundamental shift in American policy when she announced that, as part of its commitment to a diplomatic solution of the deepening nuclear stand-off with Tehran, the Bush administration was prepared to offer Iran an unprecedented "package" of incentives to return to the negotiating table. As part of that process, the White House even signaled its willingness to hold direct negotiations with the Iranian regime for the first time in 27 years.

Yet today, prospects for a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear impasse are increasingly remote. Iran's dogged refusal to provide a clear and unambiguous answer to the most recent offer, coupled with its insistence on continuing uranium enrichment, has reopened the debate over how the United States can prevent the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran.

FAILED APPROACHES

So far, discussions about strategy toward Iran in the United States have been simplistic. When confronted with Iran's nuclear ambitions, American policymakers and analysts alike have tended to gravitate toward one of two flawed options: diplomacy or military action.

As the Bush administration's ill-fated overture suggests, negotiations with the Islamic Republic are futile. The offer made public by Secretary Rice in late May was the third such effort in the past decade. Between 1994 and 1997, the European Union attempted to moderate Iran's support for terrorism and pursuit of weapons of mass destruction through a series of diplomatic and economic incentives.¹ By the time it was finally tabled in 1997, that policy, known as "critical dialogue," had provided the Islamic Republic with economic aid and international legitimacy, but had failed to alter Iranian behavior in any meaningful way. More recently, in 2003, the EU "troika" (France, Germany and Great Britain) attempted to revive "critical dialogue" in an effort to deal with Iran's expanding atomic effort, with very similar results.

All three approaches failed because they fundamentally misread one critical issue: the political will of the Iranian leadership to become a nuclear power. And future diplomatic ventures that seek an end to Iran's nuclear program are likely to meet a similar fate, since Iran's Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has defined an Iranian nuclear capability as an "absolute right" that his regime will never consider abandoning.²

Military action against the Iranian nuclear program, meanwhile, is likely to be just as self-defeating. Few observers, either in the United States or abroad, doubt that America possesses the operational capability to carry out such a strike. But tactical considerations—among them incomplete intelligence about the scope of Iran's nuclear effort and the possibility of a serious asymmetric response from the Iranian regime—mitigate strongly against pursuing such a course of action as anything other than a last resort. Perhaps most significant, however, are the internal ramifications of any prospective military strike. Since Iran's nuclear program is one of very few issues that is supported both by ordinary Iranians and regime hard-liners within the Islamic Republic, military action is likely to result in a "rally around the flag" effect that strengthens—rather than weakens—the current regime in Tehran.

Neither will it be possible to effectively deter a nuclear Iran, as some observers have suggested.³ During the Cold War, the threat of mutual nuclear annihilation created a stable "balance of terror" between Moscow and Washington. This deterrence paradigm functioned successfully because a series of conditions (good communication, rational decision-making, well-informed strategic planning, and, most importantly, a shared assumption that war should be avoided) were presumed to exist between the U.S. and the USSR.

None of these conditions currently exist in America's relationship with Iran. For over two-and-a-half decades, since the November 1979 takeover of the American embassy in Tehran, the United States has not had steady official contacts with the Islamic Republic. As a result, American policymakers today have little insight into the

Iranian regime's decision-making process—or the government's potential “red lines” in the unfolding confrontation over its nuclear ambitions.

Likewise, U.S. officials have not adequately understood the implications of the internal political changes that are now taking place within the Islamic Republic. The past several years have seen a re-entrenchment of conservative forces in the Iranian body politic. Iran's clerical army, the *Pasdaran*, has been the principal beneficiary of this trend, taking on major new political and economic powers within the regime. This crop of radicals is distinct from other nodes of regime power in the Islamic Republic. Its members are overwhelmingly military strategists and tacticians, rather than professional clerics, and generally lack the political experience of Iran's clerical establishment (including the ability to safely navigate international crises). Their ascendance has created significant shift in the regime's traditional balance of power—one that includes the emergence of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, himself a former *Pasdaran* commander, as an independent foreign policy actor in his own right.

Nor can it be assumed that both countries are seeking to avoid a conflict. On the contrary, at least one segment of the Iranian leadership now appears to be seeking just such a showdown. Since his assumption of power in August 2005, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has charted an increasingly confrontational foreign policy course vis-à-vis the United States and Europe. Significantly, this brinksmanship appears to have deep theological underpinnings. Like his religious mentor, the radical Qom cleric Mohammed Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, Iran's president believes fervently in the imminent return of the “Mahdi,” the Islamic Messiah of Shi'ite theology. Moreover, as Ahmadinejad has made clear, this second coming will be brought about through a civilizational clash with the West—“a historic war between the oppressor [Christians] and the world of Islam”—in which Iran will play a leading role.⁴

Given the forgoing, it should be assumed that the establishment of a successful bilateral deterrence relationship will be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve with the current Iranian leadership—effectively making Iran “undeterrable” in the traditional sense of the word.

THREE PRIORITIES

This does not mean that the United States does not have the means to address the Iranian nuclear threat, however. Instead, Washington would do well to simultaneously focus its energies on three objectives:

ECONOMIC PRESSURE Today, the Islamic Republic possesses at least three fundamental economic vulnerabilities. The first is its reliance on foreign supplies of

refined petroleum products; more than a third of Iran's annual consumption of over 64.5 million liters of gasoline is currently imported from a variety of foreign sources, at an estimated cost of more than \$3 billion annually.⁵ The second is the country's centralized economic structure, which is dominated by a small number of powerful families and charitable foundations (known as *bonyads*).⁶ The third vulnerability derives from Iran's dependence on foreign direct investment; Iran's energy sector currently requires approximately \$1 billion annually to maintain current production levels, and an additional half a billion dollars to increase output.⁷ Through economic measures that target these weaknesses, the United States and its international allies have the ability to substantially influence regime decision-making—and, potentially, to galvanize serious domestic unrest within the Islamic Republic as well.

DEMOCRACY PROMOTION Back in February, the Bush administration took the welcome step of asking Congress for \$75 million to “support the aspirations of the Iranian people for freedom in their own country.”⁸ Five months later, however, these efforts appear to be faltering. Despite a series of encouraging developments—including the establishment of a dedicated Office of Iranian Affairs within the State Department's Bureau of Near East Affairs, and plans for a major expansion of government broadcasting to Iran—the Bush administration has not yet articulated a clear vision for achieving democratic change within the Islamic Republic. More detrimental still have been the Bush administration's diplomatic efforts to defuse the expanding confrontation over Iran's nuclear program, which have led it to seek accommodation with Iran's ayatollahs at the expense of the country's captive population. Revitalizing its commitment to democracy in Iran means that the Bush administration must expand its contacts with the Iranian opposition, increase grassroots efforts to engage ordinary Iranians, and pursue a policy that unequivocally favors freedom, rather than accommodation or “reform” of the current regime in Tehran.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY The United States cannot fracture the current domestic consensus in favor of the regime's nuclear program without highlighting to the Iranian people the risks associated with the runaway atomic ambitions of their government. Nor can it hope to convey to the majority of Iranians that oppose the current regime in Tehran that it stands with them in their desire for change without proper outreach. Yet today, American public diplomacy falls far short of these objectives. Despite widespread popularity, the U.S. government's principal vehicles for public broadcasting into Iran, *Radio Farda* and the Voice of America's Persian Service, continue to suffer from serious systemic dysfunctions. These include sub-optimal programming, a lack of defined goals and no metrics by which to measure success. As a result, American outreach is overwhelmingly reactive, often irrelevant, and at times downright damaging to U.S. objectives. If it hopes to persevere in the

battle for Iranian “hearts and minds,” the United States must craft a clear message of hope and transformation that is continuously calibrated to the Iranian “marketplace,” and that message must be capable of penetrating the regime’s increasingly sophisticated barriers. And, if official public diplomacy channels are not up to the task, the U.S. government should empower U.S.-based NGOs capable of effectively carrying such a message.

These components are interdependent. Without economic pressure, the international community cannot hope to slow the pace of Iran’s nuclear program. Truly eliminating the threat posed by an atomic Islamic Republic, however, requires changing the regime that will ultimately wield an Iranian bomb. And neither goal can be accomplished without the assistance of the one constituency that truly represents the future of Iran: the Iranian people themselves.

LOOKING AHEAD

In its April 2006 National Security Strategy, the Bush administration noted that the United States faces “no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran.”⁹ That challenge is two-fold; the first stems from Iran’s nuclear ambitions, the second from the driver of those efforts: the nature of the regime itself. The former problem is immediate. The latter is long-term. But Washington must confront both, or risk the entrenchment of a radical order in the Middle East that is deeply antagonistic to the United States. Should that happen, there can be little doubt that America’s ability to promote democratic change and combat international terrorism will take a giant step backward.

NOTES:

¹ Johannes Reissner, “Europe and Iran: Critical Dialogue,” in Richard N. Haass and Meghan L. O’Sullivan, eds., *Honey and Vinegar: Incentives, Sanctions and Foreign Policy* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 42.

² Helene Cooper and John O’Neil, “Cleric Vows Iran Will Never Talk With U.S. on Nuclear Program,” *New York Times*, June 30, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/30/world/middleeast/30cnd-iran.html?ex=1153195200&en=38009fdc484d2215&ei=5070>.

³ See, for example, Barry R. Posen, “We Can Live with a Nuclear Iran,” *New York Times*, February 27, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/27/opinion/27posen.html>.

⁴ “Ahmadinejad: Wipe Israel Off Map,” *Al-Jazeera* (Doha), October 26, 2005, <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/15E6BF77-6F91-46EE-A4B5-A3CE0E9957EA.htm>.

⁵ “Iran’s Refining Capacity to Increase to 900,000,” [iranmania.com](http://www.iranmania.com), February 19, 2006, <http://www.iranmania.com/News/ArticleView/Default.asp?ArchiveNews=Yes&NewsCode=40656&NewsKind=CurrentAffairs>.

⁶ Paul Klebnikov, “Millionaire Mullahs,” *Forbes*, July 21, 2003, http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2003/0721/056_print.html.

⁷ “NIOC Undertaking Host of Projects to Boost Oil Output,” *Middle East Economic Survey* XLVIII, no 19, (2005), as cited in A.F. Alhajji, “Will Iran’s Nuclear Standoff Cause a World Energy Crisis? (Part 1 of 2),” *Middle East Economic Survey* XLIX, no. 13 (2006) <http://www.mees.com/postedarticles/oped/v49n13-5OD01.htm>.

⁸ Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Remarks before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, DC, February 15, 2006, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/61262.htm>.

⁹ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, White House, March 2006, 25.