

JOINT EXPERTS' STATEMENT ON IRAN

Among the many challenges that will greet President-elect Obama when he takes office, there are few, if any, more urgent and complex than the question of Iran. There are also few issues more clouded by myths and misconceptions. In this Joint Experts' Statement on Iran, a group of top scholars, experts and diplomats - with years of experience studying and dealing with Iran - have come together to clear away some of the myths that have driven the failed policies of the past and to outline a factually-grounded, five-step strategy for dealing successfully with Iran in the future.

Despite recent glimmers of diplomacy, the United States and Iran remain locked in a cycle of threats and defiance that destabilizes the Middle East and weakens U.S. national security.

Today, Iran and the United States are unable to coordinate campaigns against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, their common enemies. Iran is either withholding help or acting to thwart U.S. interests in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Gaza. Within Iran, a looming sense of external threat has empowered hard-liners and given them both motive and pretext to curb civil liberties and further restrict democracy. On the nuclear front, Iran continues to enrich uranium in spite of binding U.N. resolutions, backed by economic sanctions, calling for it to suspend enrichment.

U.S. efforts to manage Iran through isolation, threats and sanctions have been tried intermittently for more than two decades. In that time they have not solved any major problem in U.S.- Iran relations, and have made most of them worse. Faced with the manifest failure of past efforts to isolate or economically coerce Iran, some now advocate escalation of sanctions or even military attack. But dispassionate analysis shows that an attack would almost

certainly backfire, wasting lives, fomenting extremism and damaging the long-term security interests of both the U.S and Israel. And long experience has shown that prospects for successfully coercing Iran through achievable economic sanctions are remote at best.

Fortunately, we are not forced to choose between a coercive strategy that has clearly failed and a military option that has very little chance of success.

There is another way, one far more likely to succeed: Open the door to direct, unconditional and comprehensive negotiations at the senior diplomatic level where personal contacts can be developed, intentions tested, and possibilities explored on both sides. Adopt policies to facilitate unofficial contacts between scholars, professionals, religious leaders, lawmakers and ordinary citizens. Paradoxical as it may seem amid all the heated media rhetoric, sustained engagement is far more likely to strengthen United States national security at this stage than either escalation to war or continued efforts to threaten, intimidate or coerce Iran.

Enclosed are five key steps the United States should take to implement an effective diplomatic strategy with Iran.

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Five Key Steps the United States Should Take to Implement an Effective Diplomatic Strategy with Iran

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November 2008

Disclaimer

This statement is the product of a large group of experts with diverse knowledge, experience and affiliations. While all members strongly support the general policy thrust and judgments reflected in this statement, they may not necessarily all concur with every specific assertion or recommendation contained therein.

1. Replace calls for regime change with a long-term strategy:

Threats are not cowing Iran and the current regime in Tehran is not in imminent peril. But few leaders will negotiate in good faith with a government they think is trying to subvert them, and that perception may well be the single greatest barrier under U.S. control to meaningful dialogue with Iran. The United States needs to stop the provocations and take a long-term view with this regime, as it did with the Soviet Union and China. We might begin by facilitating broad-ranging people-to-people contacts, opening a U.S. interest section in Tehran, and promoting cultural exchanges.

2. Support human rights through effective, international means:

While the United States is rightly concerned with Iran's worsening record of human rights violations, the best way to address that concern is through supporting recognized international efforts. Iranian human rights and democracy advocates confirm that American political interference masquerading as "democracy promotion" is harming, not helping, the cause of democracy in Iran.

3. Allow Iran a place at the table – alongside other key states – in shaping the future of Iraq, Afghanistan and the region:

This was the recommendation of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group with regard to Iraq. It may be counter-intuitive in today's political climate – but it is sound policy. Iran has a long-term interest in the stability of its neighbors. Moreover, the United States and Iran support the same government in Iraq and face common enemies (the Taliban and al-Qaeda) in Afghanistan. Iran has shown it can be a valuable ally when included as a partner, and a troublesome thorn when not. Offering Iran a place at the table cannot assure cooperation, but it will greatly increase the likelihood of cooperation by giving Iran something it highly values that it can lose by non-cooperation. The United States might start by appointing a special envoy with broad authority to deal comprehensively and constructively with Iran (as opposed to trading accusations) and explore its willingness to work with the United States on issues of common concern.

4. Address the nuclear issue within the context of a broader U.S. - Iran opening:

Nothing is gained by imposing

peremptory preconditions on dialogue. The United States should take an active leadership role in ongoing multilateral talks to resolve the nuclear impasse in the context of wide-ranging dialogue with Iran. Negotiators should give the nuclear talks a reasonable deadline, and retain the threat of tougher sanctions if negotiations fail. They should also, however, offer the credible prospect of security assurances and specific, tangible benefits such as the easing of U.S. sanctions in response to positive policy shifts in Iran. Active U.S. involvement may not cure all, but it certainly will change the equation, particularly if it is part of a broader opening.

5. Re-energize the Arab-Israeli peace process and act as an honest broker in that process:

Israel's security lies in making peace with its neighbors. Any U.S. moves towards mediating the Arab-Israeli crisis in a balanced way would ease tensions in the region, and would be positively received as a step forward for peace. As a practical matter, however, experience has shown that any long-term solution to Israel's problems with the Palestinians and Lebanon probably will require dealing, directly or indirectly, with Hamas and Hezbollah. Iran supports these organizations, and thus has influence with them. If properly managed, a U.S. rapprochement with Iran, even an opening of talks, could help in dealing with Arab-Israeli issues, benefiting Israel as well as its neighbors.

Long-standing diplomatic practice makes clear that talking directly to a foreign government in no way signals approval of the government, its policies or its actions. Indeed, there are numerous instances in our history when clear-eyed U.S. diplomacy with regimes we deemed objectionable – e.g., Soviet Union, China, North Korea, Libya and Iran itself (cooperating in Afghanistan to topple the Taliban after 9/11) – produced positive results in difficult situations.

After many years of mutual hostility, no one should expect that engaging Iran will be easy. It may prove impossible. But past policies have not worked, and what has been largely missing from U.S. policy for most of the past three decades is a sustained commitment to real diplomacy with Iran. The time has come to see what true diplomacy can accomplish.

Basic Misconceptions about Iran

U.S. policies towards Iran have failed to achieve their objectives. A key reason for their failure is that they are rooted in fundamental misconceptions about Iran. This annex addresses eight key misconceptions that have driven U.S. policy in the wrong direction.

Myth # 1. President Ahmadinejad calls the shots on nuclear and foreign policy...

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has grabbed the world's attention with his inflammatory and sometimes offensive statements. But he does not call the shots on Iran's nuclear and foreign policy. The ultimate decision-maker is Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the commander-in-chief of Iran's forces. Despite his frequently hostile rhetoric aimed at Israel and the West, Khamenei's track record reveals a cautious decision-maker who acts after consulting advisors holding a range of views, including views sharply critical of Ahmadinejad. That said, it is clear that U.S. policies and rhetoric have bolstered hard-liners in Iran, just as Ahmadinejad's confrontational rhetoric has bolstered hard-liners here.

Myth # 2. The political system of the Islamic Republic is frail and ripe for regime change.

In fact, there is currently no significant support within Iran for extra-constitutional regime change. Yes, there is popular dissatisfaction, but Iranians also recall the aftermath of their own revolution in 1979: lawlessness, mass executions, and the emigration of over half a million people, followed by a costly war. They have seen the outcome of U.S.-sponsored regime change in Afghanistan and in Iraq. They want no part of it.

Myth # 3. The Iranian leadership's religious beliefs render them undeterrable.

The recent history of Iran makes crystal clear that national self-preservation and regional influence – not some quest for martyrdom in the service of Islam – is Iran's main foreign policy goal. For example:

- In the 1990s, Iran chose a closer relationship with Russia over support for rebellious Chechen Muslims.
- Iran actively supported and helped to finance the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.
- Iran has ceased its efforts to export the Islamic revolution to other Persian Gulf states, in favor of developing good relations with the governments of those states.
- During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran took the pragmatic step of developing secret ties and trading arms with Israel, even as Iran and Israel denounced each other in public.

Myth # 4. Iran's current leadership is implacably opposed to the United States.

Iran will not accept preconditions for dialogue with the United States, any more than the United States would accept preconditions for talking to Iran. But Iran is clearly open to broad-ranging dialogue with the United States. In fact, it has made multiple peace overtures that the United States has rebuffed. Right after 9/11, Iran worked with the United States to get rid of the Taliban in Afghanistan, including paying for the Afghan troops serving under U.S. command. Iran helped establish the U.S.-backed government and then contributed more than \$750 million to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Iran expressed interest in a broader dialogue in 2002 and 2003. Instead, it was labeled part of an "axis of evil."

In 2005, reform-minded President Khatami was replaced by the hardliner, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. But the same Supreme Leader who authorized earlier overtures is still in office today and he acknowledged, as recently as January 2008, that "the day that relations with America prove beneficial for the Iranian nation, I will be the first one to approve of that." All this does not prove that Iran will bargain in good faith with us. But it does disprove the claim that we know for sure they will not.

Myth # 5. Iran has declared its intention to attack Israel in order to "wipe Israel off the map."

This claim is based largely on a speech by President Ahmadinejad on Oct. 26, 2005, quoting a remark by Ayatollah Khomeini made decades ago: "This regime that is occupying Qods [Jerusalem] must be wiped off/eliminated from the pages of history/our times." Both before and since, Ahmadinejad has made numerous other, offensive, insulting and threatening remarks about Israel and other nations – most notably his indefensible denial of the Holocaust. However, he has been criticized within Iran for these remarks. Supreme Leader Khamenei himself has "clarified" that "the Islamic Republic has never threatened and will never threaten any country" and specifically that Iran will not attack Israel unless Iran is attacked first. Ahmadinejad also has made clear, or been forced to clarify, that he was referring to regime change through demographics (giving the Palestinians a vote in a unitary state), not war. What we know is that Ahmadinejad's recent statements do not appear to have materially altered Iran's long-standing *policy* – which, for

Basic Misconceptions about Iran

decades, has been to deny the legitimacy of Israel; to arm and aid groups opposing Israel in Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank; but also, to promise to accept any deal with Israel that the Palestinians accept.

Myth # 6. U.S.-sponsored “democracy promotion” can help bring about true democracy in Iran.

Instead of fostering democratic elements inside Iran, U.S.-backed “democracy promotion” has provided an excuse to stifle them. That is why champions of human rights and democracy in Iran agree with the dissident who said, “The best thing the Americans can do for democracy in Iran is not to support it.”

Myth # 7. Iran is clearly and firmly committed to developing nuclear weapons.

If Iraq teaches anything, it is the need to be both rigorous and honest when confronted with ambiguous evidence about WMDs. Yet once again we find proponents of conflict over-stating their case, this time by claiming that Iran has declared an intention to acquire nuclear weapons. In fact, Iranian leaders have consistently denied any such intention and even said that such weapons are “against Islam.”

The issue is not what Iran is saying, but what it is doing, and here the facts are murky. We know that Iran is openly enriching uranium and learning to do it more efficiently, but claims this is only for peaceful use. There are detailed but disputed allegations that Iran secretly worked on nuclear weapons design before Ahmadinejad came to power, concerns that such work continues, and certainty that Iran is not cooperating fully with efforts to resolve the allegations. We also know that Iran has said it will negotiate on its enrichment program – without preconditions – and submit to intrusive inspections as part of a final deal. Past negotiations between Iran and a group of three European countries plus China and Russia have not gone anywhere, but the United States, Iran’s chief nemesis, has not been active in those talks.

The facts viewed as a whole give cause for deep concern, but they are not unambiguous and in fact support a variety of interpretations: that Iran views enrichment chiefly as a source of national pride (akin to our moon landing); that Iran is advancing towards weapons capability but sees

this as a bargaining chip to use in broader negotiations with the United States; that Iran is intent on achieving the capability to build a weapon on short notice as a deterrent to feared U.S. or Israeli attack; or that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons to support aggressive goals. The only effective way to illuminate – and constructively alter – Iran’s intentions is through skillful and careful diplomacy. History shows that sanctions alone are unlikely to succeed, and a strategy limited to escalating threats or attacking Iran is likely to backfire – creating or hardening a resolve to acquire nuclear weapons while inciting a backlash against us throughout the region.

Myth # 8. Iran and the United States have no basis for dialogue.

Those who favored refusing Iran’s offers of dialogue in 2002 and 2003 – when they thought the U.S. position so strong there was no need to talk – now assert that our position is so weak we cannot afford to talk. Wrong in both cases. Iran is eager for an end to sanctions and isolation, and needs access to world-class technology to bring new supplies of oil and gas online. Both countries share an interest in stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan, which border Iran. Both support the Maliki government in Iraq, and face common enemies (the Taliban and al-Qaeda) in Afghanistan. Both countries share the goal of combating narco-trafficking in the region. These opportunities exist, and the two governments have pursued them very occasionally in the past, but they have mostly been obscured in the belligerent rhetoric from both sides.

Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Lynn Kunkle and Chic Dambach to the genesis and development of this project, the statement and its message. Barbara Slavin, Barnett Rubin, Farideh Farhi, Rola el-Husseini, Philip Giraldi, Jake Colvin, and Jon Wolfsthal authored commissioned papers on which this statement draws. Evan Ream, Asher Berman, Rachel Lipsey, Jacob Poushter and Leslie Schaefer provided valuable research assistance. Finally, we thank The Connect U.S. Fund, the Ploughshares Fund, The Pluralism Fund, and our individual donors for generous financial support.

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Philip Giraldi is a former CIA counter-terrorism specialist and military intelligence officer who served eighteen years overseas in Turkey, Italy, Germany, and Spain, where he was Chief of Base in Barcelona from 1989 to 1992. As a recognized authority on international security and counterterrorism issues he has appeared often on radio and TV, including "Good Morning America," "60 Minutes," MSNBC, NPR, BBC World News, FOX News, Polish National Television, Croatian National Television, al-Jazeera, and al-Arabiya. Currently, he is President of San Marco International, a consulting firm that specializes in international security management and risk assessment, and also a partner in Cannistraro Associates, a security consultancy located in McLean Virginia.

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Dr. Walsh's research and writings focus on international security, and in particular, topics involving weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. He has testified before the United States Senate on the issue of nuclear terrorism as well as on Iran's nuclear program. He has also chaired the Harvard University International Working Group on Radiological Terrorism. Among his current projects are two series of dialogues on nuclear issues, one with representatives from North Korea and one with leading figures in Iran. He has appeared frequently in the media as an expert on weapons of mass destruction and terrorism issues, including more than 300 appearances on CNN. His most recent publications include a chapter on Iran's nuclear program in *Terrorist Attacks and Nuclear Proliferation: Strategies for Overlapping Dangers* and a chapter on nuclear weapons in *A Muslim-Christian Study and Action Guide to the Nuclear Weapons Danger*. He has also published *Learning from Past Success: The NPT and the Future of Non-proliferation* for the Commission on Weapons of Mass Destruction, chaired by Hans Blix (2006).