

## Iran's Nuclear Challenge: U.S. Options



On January 12, 2010, Hudson Institute's Center for Political-Military Analysis and the Partnership for a Secure America co-hosted a panel discussion on how the United States should respond to Iran's nuclear program. The event marked the second discussion in a series on nuclear security issues funded by the Connect U.S. Fund.

**Ellen Laipson**, President and CEO of the Stimson Center, was the first to speak. She was followed by Ambassador **James F. Dobbins**, Director of the RAND Corporation's International Security and Defense Policy Center. **Hillel Fradkin**, Senior Fellow and Director of the Hudson Institute's Center for Islam, Democracy and the Future of the Muslim World, spoke next. **Alex Vatanka**, Editor of Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst, was the final panelist. **Matthew Rojansky**, Executive Director of the Partnership for a Secure America, and **Richard Weitz**, Senior Fellow and Director of the Hudson Institute's Center for Political-Military Analysis, co-chaired the panel.

### U.S. Policy Goals

Ambassador Dobbins argued that three basic goals should guide an enduring U.S. strategy regarding Iran: halting or reversing its nuclear program, moderating Iran's external behavior, and encouraging reform within the Iranian regime. Although Dobbins saw these goals as being compatible in the long run in that achieving one would facilitate attaining the others, he acknowledged that tactical conflicts might arise among them.

Ellen Laipson acknowledged that the Iranian case is a particularly difficult one due to the historical and ideological antagonisms and misunderstandings between the two countries. She believes that the frequent switching of U.S. public priorities regarding Iran—jumping from an anti-terrorism to an anti-nuclear focus to a pro-human rights platform—has complicated the effectiveness of U.S. diplomacy regarding that country. The United States should, in her opinion, more clearly define its goals in dealing with Iran, recognizing that U.S. objectives must be modest given Washington’s limited influence and consider how pursuing its goals could affect other U.S. foreign policy objectives. For example, the United States has to reflect how its actions regarding Iran will strengthen the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Although important, the issue of the Iranian nuclear program should not overwhelm discussion of other important U.S. goals or serve as the litmus test for all U.S.-Iranian interactions. It was important to consider a package of desirable and achievable objectives—such as limiting tensions between Tehran and other governments as well as inducing Iranians to define their security goals in ways that are more congruent with U.S. interests—in order to create room for opportunities and tradeoffs. The long-term objective should be to create opportunities for a reconciliation between the U.S. and Iranian governments as well as their peoples.



Dr. Fradkin cited constraining Iran’s nuclear program as the most important U.S. priority, both because of the threats it presented to other countries and the damage it was inflicting on the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. Fradkin was more optimistic than the other speakers that the Iranian people would eventually succeed in replacing the Iranian regime, so he argued that

even delaying Iran’s ability to manufacture nuclear weapons by a few years could yield great benefits. Alex Vatanka was less optimistic about the prospects that the Iranian popular opposition would change their regime or modify Iran’s nuclear policies, but he believed that U.S. policies designed to weaken the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) could both reduce repression within Iran and weaken the influence of a major supporter of anti-American policies within Iran.

## Iran’s Domestic Situation

Vatanka observed that, since last June’s Iranian presidential elections engendered widespread suspicions of fraud and a mass protest movement against the declared winner, incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the clerical regime, though certainly not on the brink of collapse, has become more concerned about domestic threats to its rule. The government has sought to silence the dissidents and appear stable and legitimate to the outside world. If anything, according to Vatanka, the IRGC has redoubled its resolve to make progress in developing Iran’s nuclear capabilities and other military potential in order to negotiate from a position of strength with foreign governments and strengthen its nationalist credentials within Iran. He anticipated further IRGC-led military exercises as well as further Iranian missile launches. In addition, Vatanka noted that many members of the opposition support Iran’s nuclear research and energy

program, while others fear that calling for a negotiated compromise that would constrain Iran's nuclear potential would make them look unpatriotic and a "Trojan Horse" for the United States. If anything, members of the Green opposition have sought to attack the regime for making excessive concessions to the United States on the nuclear issue. Although members of the mass popular opposition have no impact on Iran's nuclear policy, members of the institutionalized opposition—who still hold important government and clerical posts—might have some influence in the future. Vatanka and Laison further noted that, since approximately seventy percent of the Iranian population is under the age of thirty, and generally have no experience with the 1979 Revolution and do not want to remain a pariah state, the decades ahead could see more favorable U.S.-Iranian relations as they assume power.

Dr. Fradkin saw the current Iranian regime as committed to the revolutionary ideology of the Islamic Republic's founders. He also cited evidence that the June 12 Iranian presidential elections were rigged in favor of Ahmadinejad's reelection. He noted the rapidity with which the results were announced as well as the implausible vote totals. He believed that the fraudulent elections had undermined the legitimacy of the Iranian regime at home and abroad. As a result, the regime was vulnerable to international sanctions that discredited its sought-after image of omnipotence. In addition, many Iranians might welcome American economic sanctions or military action against the Iranian government.

The numerous arrests, injuries, and killings carried out against protesters by the IRGC led Ambassador Dobbins to believe that Iranian Revolutionaries, previously in rough political balance with the Islamists and the Republicans, has enhanced its political influence and emerged as the dominant faction in Iran's decision-making process. He was not optimistic about the prospects of imminent political change that would lead to a new Iranian regime to pursue less hostile policies toward the United States.

Laipson was also pessimistic about the prospects of a near-term collapse of the Iranian regime. In her assessment, societal change in Iran, as in other countries, is primarily driven by local factors. She doubted that U.S. policies could contribute to this process, noting the limited U.S. presence in the country at present as well as the 30-year history of public antagonism between the two countries. She also warned that overt American efforts to change Iran's political system could backfire.

### **Prospects for Engagement**

The general consensus of the speakers was that recent U.S. attempts to engage Iran diplomatically have proven unsuccessful and this situation was unlikely to change so long as the current Iranian leaders remain in power. Dobbins saw the Iranians as too preoccupied with their internal political struggles to make a good partner for diplomatic engagement. Fradkin noted how the main result of the years of frustrating negotiations, supported by both the Bush and Obama administrations as well as U.S. allies, has been that Iran had made further progress in developing sensitive nuclear technologies and in improving the range and accuracy of its ballistic missiles. Laipson attributed this lack of success to the limited American presence in Iran during the last thirty years, as well as to the revolutionary ideology of Iran's post-1979 regime, which demonizes America, does not respond well to U.S. appeals to become a responsible global

stakeholder, and makes cooperating with the United States difficult for Iranians. According to Vatanka, many Iranian leaders believe that Iran has the upper hand diplomatically with respect to the United States, making them unwilling to offer further concessions, thereby increasing the difficulties of engagement. All of the speakers noted the importance of courting the younger generation of Iranians to build good will that could yield dividends in the future. Additionally, the four panelists emphasized that establishing an embassy, while useful, was unlikely to happen soon, as the Iranian government would likely demand U.S. concessions that Americans would find unacceptable.

Laipson was pessimistic about the ability of other governments to induce changes in Iranian foreign policy through diplomacy, noting that many of them, especially the Europeans, believed that only a deal between Washington and Tehran would resolve the Iranian nuclear issue. She believed that other important countries, such the so-called middle powers, could exert greater influence in pressing Iran to moderate its nuclear policies. Dobbins and Fradkin noted that many of Iran's neighbors, though apprehensive about Tehran's regional ambitions, wanted the United States to solve the Iranian nuclear problem without involving them too directly.

### Military Options



Laipson, Dobbins, and Vatanka believed that any U.S. military attack against Iran, even if limited to its nuclear sites, would enflame Iranian public opinion against the United States and rally support for a harder government line on the nuclear issue. Laipson maintained that a strike against nuclear sites would redouble the government's resolve to obtain nuclear weapons to prevent further U.S.

attacks. Dobbins argued that any use of force that left the current regime in power would probably work against the three core goals that should guide U.S. strategy.

Vatanka believed that the Iranian leaders now believe that they could survive a limited foreign military strike. For example, he pointed to the underground nuclear enrichment facility in Qom as illustrating the regime's strategy of seeking to preserve its nuclear potential even in the case of a limited military strike. The United States should consider how it can best deflate the Iranian leadership's sense of overconfidence short of considering military options.

Fradkin, however, thought that many Iranians might accept a limited U.S. military strike against IRGC-related targets. Although not necessarily advocating a military strike, he would not remove the option from the table. He noted that a successful attack could delay Iran's ability to develop a nuclear weapon by years, increasing the possibility that the current Iranian regime would be superseded by one less hostile toward the United States. Like others, Fradkin warned that many people would blame the United States for an Israeli attack since they would conclude that Washington had given Israel a green light for any military action against Iran. He added that, if using military force became necessary, it would be better for a great power like the United

States to assume that responsibility directly, especially since U.S. military capabilities for such an option were superior to those available to Israel.

## **International Sanctions**

The option of imposing additional sanctions on Iran received the most attention. As with the panelists' diverging opinions on potential military action, the differences in their positions primarily reflected their varying interpretations how Iranian public opinion might respond.

Ambassador Dobbins listed five benefits that advocates of international sanctions believe they might achieve. First, sanctions could induce Iran to change its objectionable behavior. Second, if used to support democracy or human rights, sanctions could promote benign internal changes in Iran. Third, sanctions could degrade or impede the growth of Iran's military power by weakening the national economy. Fourth, sanctions against Iran's nuclear program could discourage other countries from pursuing nuclear weapons. Finally, sanctions offer an alternative to less palatable alternative options. Dobbins believed that the experience with using sanctions in other cases suggests they were unlikely to induce a major change in Iran's nuclear policies, at least in the short run, or compel the Iranian government to curb its human rights abuse. But they could discourage other regimes from seeking nuclear options and allow members of Congress and others to register their concerns about Iranian behavior without requiring them to advocate the use of force or accept a nuclear Iran as inevitable.

Laipson, Dobbins, and Vatanka concurred that China and Russia would likely resist imposing very harsh sanctions on Iran. They did believe that, besides signaling American disapproval of the Iranian government, the only other likely benefit from sanctions would be if they were targeted against the IRGC, which is running the nuclear program. Vatanka pointed out that the Revolutionary Guard considered both Iran's nuclear and missile programs extremely important, so that if the sanctions could somehow cripple those programs, they could inflict a major blow to the morale and popular legitimacy of the IRGC, a major anti-American force in Iranian politics. Laipson, Dobbins, and Vatanka cautioned against imposing broader sanctions against consumer products, which would harm the Iranian people and potentially alienate them from the United States and rally them behind their regime.

Fradkin argued that the Iranian public, even if adversely affected by U.S. sanctions, might instead blame their misfortune on the Iranian government and its confrontation foreign and domestic politics. He also doubted that any sanctions could be so constructed to only affect the IRGC given that the Revolutionary Guard had expanded its control over much of the Iranian economy as well as its military and security apparatus. Fradkin therefore supported a U.S.-led effort to seek international support for comprehensive, "crippling" sanctions on Iran that ideally will undermine a main pillar of the regime—the image of power it seeks to project to its domestic and foreign opponents. If, as expected, Russia and China blocked U.N. sanctions, Fradkin would favor working with European countries, whose governments he expected would be more willing to go along with punitive measures now that their years of sincere engagement efforts had failed to yield favorable results.

## **Dealing with a Nuclear-Armed Iran**

Several questions from the audience inquired how Iranian behavior might change if Iran acquired the capacity to manufacture nuclear weapons. U.S. intelligence indicates that Iran does not currently have the ability to manufacture nuclear weapons but that Tehran might achieve such a capability within the next few years. The panelists were asked to assess the accuracy of this intelligence and how the U.S. should react if Iran does attain the ability to produce nuclear warheads. Dr. Fradkin said that the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate stating that Iran had stopped trying to develop a nuclear weapon might have been accurate at the time, but that Iran had likely resumed such efforts since then given the publicly available information. Ambassador Dobbins noted that earlier intelligence assessments had overestimated the pace of Iran's subsequent nuclear progress. Laipson added that a fundamental problem was that the United States lacked an embassy in Tehran or other means to collect important information that would enrich U.S. assessments of Iranian nuclear developments or other events within Iran.

When asked to speculate how Iran might behave if it acquired nuclear weapons, Dobbins suggested other historical examples of how country's foreign policies changed after they acquired nuclear weapons might offer some guidance, but the past record was mixed. Sometimes, as in the case of Pakistan, obtaining a nuclear arsenal made countries more aggressive, whereas in other cases, as with China and Russia, it moderated their behavior. Similarly, Iran could become more aggressive diplomatically, using its nuclear weapons capacity as leverage in negotiations, or Tehran could become less aggressive since Iranian leaders might perceive their nuclear arsenal as deterring foreign attacks and threats. In either case, Dobbins stressed that the United States should take care to avoid actions that would recognize the legitimacy of Iran's nuclear arsenal in the hope that a future Iranian regime might renounce it in order to end the country's isolation from the international community. Laipson observed that Iran would almost certainly not use such weapons to attack other countries, but would employ them to enhance its negotiating leverage. Nonetheless, she noted that Iran is already the major military power in the region, excluding extra-regional powers like the United States, so Iran's possessing nuclear weapons would not necessarily engender a major change in regional security dynamics.

Dr. Fradkin, though agreeing that Iran would be unlikely to use a nuclear weapon in war, offered several examples of how an Iranian government that possessed a nuclear arsenal might become emboldened in its foreign policy. Tehran could use nuclear weapons to add weight to its efforts to remove U.S. military forces from neighboring countries, assert dominance over other Persian Gulf countries, try to force concessions from Israel, or threaten nearby oil-producing states like Saudi Arabia to keep oil prices high. To add credibility to its demands against the United States or to create a bargaining chip for negotiations with Washington, Iran could place its ballistic missiles in a country such as Venezuela that would be in striking range of the U.S. homeland. He also worried that Iran's successful acquisition of nuclear weapons would encourage other countries, especially Iran's neighbors, to pursue their own nuclear options. Given what he saw as the limited applicability of Cold War analogies regarding the nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, Fradkin emphasized the importance of conducting additional studies—for example, on potential delivery systems for Iranian nuclear weapons—to determine what types of threats Iran could pose.