

## Iran's Role and Power in the Region and the International System

The Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination (LISD) at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and the Liechtenstein Institute in Vienna, Austria (LIVA) convened the colloquium, "Iran's Role and Power in the Region and the International System," March 5-8, 2009 in Triesenberg, Liechtenstein. This colloquium was funded in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, by the SIBIL Foundation, Vaduz, and by the Government of the Principality of Liechtenstein. It was organized by Miriam Schive, Resident Director of LIVA, and chaired by Wolfgang Danspeckgruber, Director of LISD.

This colloquium convened a select group of academics, diplomats and experts from states in the wider Middle East, the EU and the US for private discussion and debate. Participants examined four issue areas with the aim of developing new ideas and proposing possible solutions to support peaceful, stable and mutually beneficial developments for Iran, the region and the international system: Iran and its eastern, western and southern regional neighbors; Iran and multilateral nuclear diplomacy; Iran and the EU; and Iran and the US.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The colloquium convened at a pivotal moment. Currently, "all chips are in the air" with respect to the parties involved, their concerns and potential actions and reactions. Recent developments and projections are part of a complex and challenging mix: a new US administration in the process of formulating and implementing new policies; Iran's presidential elections; fresh news about the progress of Iran's nuclear program; ongoing developments and emerging challenges with respect to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq; Israel's elections; Saudi Arabia's politics of succession; price changes in hydrocarbons; and the global economic recession.



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Iran plays a strategically important role in the most pressing issues in its region and in the global order, including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, political stability, the Middle East peace process, terrorism, nuclear nonproliferation and energy security. The challenges facing Iran, the region and the international community are daunting, but they also offer opportunities for cooperation and compromise.

Rhetoric and timing must be key considerations when weighing options about how to approach Iran. Words matter and international leaders must avoid "talking down" to Iran, just as the Iranian leadership must choose its words carefully. Words have been weapons. From the "Axis of Evil" to the "Great Satan" heated rhetoric has largely supplanted reasoned dialogue. This should change.



Timing is critical. As time passes, options narrow, positions harden and prospects for peace wane. The current international goodwill toward and high hopes for the Obama administration are fleeting. The incoming Israeli administration will be consolidating its power and its foreign policy approach will likely become hardened absent progress on the Iranian nuclear front. Afghan elections may bring new actors into power, for better or worse. The international community will be faced with tough choices as it continues to grapple with and feel the effects of the current economic crisis.

The Iranian nuclear program is an issue of serious contention among Iran's neighbors and other states in the greater Middle East and beyond. The existence of an Iranian nuclear weapons program would create severe regional tensions, and increase the threat of military strikes on Iran, as well as the possibility for nuclear proliferation within the region. But three different "clocks are ticking:" in Iran, in Israel, and in the United States.

## Iran and the Region

### *Afghanistan*

There is a natural point of convergence between Iran and the international community with regard to Afghanistan, especially in the areas of counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, fighting the Taliban, and shared concerns about Pakistan. These issues therefore comprise the best platform for cooperation. A group of key players such as the Afghan government, the US, Iran, Pakistan and other stakeholders including India, China, Russia, key members of NATO and the EU should convene as they recently did in The Hague to discuss these potential areas of cooperation. It is essential that Iran be given an equal role as a partner, rather than merely an assistant or informant.

### *Iraq*

With the impending US troop withdrawal, Iraq and its neighbors, along with the US, key European partners and Russia, need to discuss ways to ensure stability and

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security during and after this process. Over time these discussions might be widened to include the question of how to stabilize the Gulf and decrease reliance on external forms of security in the region. Again, there is room for engagement with Iran within this framework of shared interests in regional security.

### *Respect and Regional Coexistence*

Iran, the Gulf and Levant states, Saudi Arabia, the US and the EU need to find a formula which recognizes and respects the independence and boundaries of all countries in the greater Middle East. This includes recognition of the right of each to exist, the right of each to choose their own form of government and economy, and the right of each to enjoy security from threats, overt or otherwise.

### Iran and Multilateral Nuclear Diplomacy

#### *"Freeze for Freeze" Plan*

Past attempts at multilateral diplomacy have failed and nearly all Iranians view the right to nuclear technology as an issue of national pride. While the nuclear issue is technically and politically complex, progress is possible because this issue is well defined and holds the potential for trade-offs and compromises. The international community should focus on shaping Iran's future plans and preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon rather than concentrating on past violations and the halting of enrichment. The "freeze for freeze" plan proposed by Javier Solana – no new sanctions in return for no new Iranian enrichment – is a critical first step toward negotiations and should be swiftly adopted.

## *The IAEA and Monitoring Mechanisms*

In order to increase the International Atomic Energy Agency's ability to monitor and respond to re-enrichment and weaponization, a group led by the IAEA and involving Iran, the US, China, Russia, France, England and Germany should focus urgently on Iran's ratification of the Non-Proliferation Treaty Additional Protocol and the resumption of serious IAEA inspections of Iran's nuclear program. Additionally, Iran should adopt transparency measures regarding centrifuge production and limits on the number of centrifuges, so that if Iran starts to convert low enriched uranium (LEU) to highly enriched uranium (HEU), the IAEA can respond. Creative ways of assuring Iran's access to fuel for its civilian nuclear needs, such as a multilateral mechanism, can be discussed within this context.

## **Iran and the European Union**

### *Economic Relations*

With 22 out of 27 member countries represented in Iran and as Iran's largest trading partner, it is clear that through its economic influence the EU has and will continue to play a critical role in Western relations with Iran. Economic cooperation will likely only increase in the future as the EU begins to diversify its energy sources, particularly in the area of natural gas, and as it starts to turn away from Russia and look toward Iran to fulfill its energy needs.

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## *Diplomacy and Human Rights*

The EU currently lacks political influence over Iran as failed attempts at comprehensive dialogue, particularly in the arena of human rights, have shown. This is due in part to a fundamental lack of understanding on the part of the Iranians of how EU foreign policy functions, which points to a failure on the part of the EU to properly communicate this process. The situation is only exacerbated by the fact that there is currently no EU representation in Iran. The Iranian government has not permitted the establishment of an EU representation and prefers to communicate through the individual member states.

Europeans contend it has been difficult to find appropriate partners on the Iranian side – aside from the Director of Human Rights in the Foreign Ministry – for a dialogue on human rights issues. Iranians identify a lack of political will within the EU to consistently pursue a tough stance on human rights violations as one of the reasons why the human rights dialogue has not produced any concrete results, contending that the EU retreats on these issues as soon as they feel it will impact trade relations.

To overcome this gap in communication, understanding and enforcement of a clear human rights policy, EU member states with representation in Iran must increase efforts to communicate the basic notions and principles of the EU to their Iranian counterparts, as well as to identify and encourage the appropriate Iranian institutions to communicate directly with the country presiding over the EU presidency. With better communication on this issue, the EU may play a more constructive role in nuclear diplomatic negotiations with Iran and as a mediator in US-Iranian relations in specific issue areas.

## **Iran and the United States**

### *Timing and Possible First Steps*

As on other issues both rhetoric and timing are of critical importance in US-Iranian relations. There may be some on either side who calculate that time is in their favor

and who thus may hinder US-Iranian rapprochement to try to advance their narrow interests. Time is working against all involved, for the passage of time increases the likelihood for radicalization of the situation. However, there is still a window of opportunity for a reasonable diplomatic dialogue.

US efforts to engage Iran should begin immediately. A reaffirmation of the Algiers Accord – the principle of non-interference – would be an appropriate first signal. The Iranians could respond with a signal of goodwill by releasing American citizens currently imprisoned in Iran.

### *Strategy*

Operating in an atmosphere of mutual respect, US and Iranian officials should create forums to discuss five interlocking sets of engagements: the nuclear issue, Afghanistan, Iraq, regional stability and bilateral relations.

Among the several options now on the table to deal with Iran, the pursuit of a comprehensive strategic framework with an all-encompassing structure to work on parallel and mutually reinforcing tracks is the most appropriate choice. This has been referred to as the “grand bargain” approach, but this terminology should be avoided. The issues need to be handled simultaneously, on different levels, but all have to move forward. Some, like cooperation on Afghanistan, will move faster and can potentially be tackled first and could serve as confidence-building measures. While negotiations on some issues, like the nuclear program, should be facilitated through third parties, on other issues it will be essential for the US and Iran to have bilateral negotiations.

### *Objectives*

There are currently no clear “end game” objectives on either the American or the Iranian side. The question remains as to whether clear objectives will have to be outlined before negotiations begin, or whether negotiations can begin with a firm mutual reassurance that both parties will remain engaged and work out their objectives throughout the process of dialogue.

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