

PolicyWatch #1395 : Special Forum Report

Coping with the Challenge of Iran

Featuring Shaul Mofaz and Nicholas Burns
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On August 1, 2008, Shaul Mofaz, deputy prime minister and transportation minister of Israel, and Nicholas Burns, who until recently was undersecretary of state for foreign affairs, addressed a special policy forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Mofaz and Ambassador Burns, who both led the U.S.-Israel strategic dialogue focusing on Iran, spoke about the challenges caused by Iran and its nuclear program. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

SHAUL MOFAZ

Iran's nuclear program is geared toward attaining military weapons capability -- something that constitutes an existential threat to the state of Israel. With such ability, Iran not only could attack Israel directly, it could also increase financial and material support under its nuclear umbrella for terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hizballah, as well as for Syria. Iran has already provided Hizballah with long-range missiles that can hit most Israeli territory, and one day, Iran could also use this power against the United States and Europe.

In the next year and a half, there will be a new reality in the region. From Israel's point of view, an Iranian nuclear breakthrough is unacceptable. No enrichment should take place anywhere on Iranian soil, and at present, it is estimated that Iran will be capable of enriching low-grade uranium in 2009, and will be able to do so at military levels by 2010.

Iran's main strategy is to buy time, and so far, it is succeeding. Time is a decisive element in changing the picture and removing the Iranian threat. Based on Tehran's past actions, most anticipate that Iran will turn down the recent offer made by the Europeans and the United States at the Geneva meeting, and will choose instead to wait out the end of the current U.S. administration. The window of opportunity to influence Iran is becoming smaller, and is about to close. It is a race against time, and Iran is winning.

A strategic approach, therefore, is necessary to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear capabilities. Several conclusions were reached during the July meeting of the U.S.-Israel strategic dialogue, one being that the world must present a united front against Iran. This includes international compliance with imposing financial sanctions on Iran, as well as barring the trade in conventional weapons with the regime.

Diplomacy should to be the primary method for halting Iran's nuclear program. In order for diplomacy to succeed, pressure on Iran's weaknesses must be drastically increased. Diplomacy, however, has its limits. The primary duty of Israel, like all states, is to protect the lives of its citizens; therefore, all options are on the table. If Israeli, U.S., or European intelligence gets proof that Iran has succeeded in developing nuclear weapons technology, then Israel will respond in a manner reflecting the existential threat posed by such a weapon. Israel takes Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad's statements regarding its destruction seriously. Israel cannot risk another Holocaust.

Israel also understands that its quarrel is with the current Iranian regime, not with the Iranian people. Only thirty years ago, Israel had excellent diplomatic relations with Iran, including extensive security cooperation.

The current regime is not only hostile toward Israel, but also toward the rest of the world.

NICHOLAS BURNS

The Middle East is becoming the world's most important region, and is increasingly the focus of U.S. foreign policy. Current issues include fighting the war in Iraq, resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and preventing Hizballah and Syria from undermining democracy in Lebanon. In addition, the United States is concerned with the oil trade and its improving relations with moderate Arab states such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Over time, however, Iran has become the regional focus.

Iran is the most difficult and complex challenge in the Middle East today. It is a primary supporter of regional terrorist groups such as Hamas, Hizballah, and Islamic Jihad, and it also funds the Shiite militant groups fighting U.S. forces in Iraq. Evidence also suggests that it has connections to the Taliban. U.S. policy should be geared toward preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear capability, preferably through negotiations and by working with the UN Security Council.

The United States ought to pursue three initiatives to deal with Iran: tougher sanctions, more diplomacy, and developing a bilateral relationship. Although the United States and Europe have been maintaining strict sanctions on Iran, the trade void is being filled by other nations, particularly Russia, China, Japan, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates. In order for sanctions to be successful, these nations need to participate fully, especially since financial sanctions are necessary for diplomacy to work.

Now is the time for diplomacy, not war. Based on the evaluations of Mohamed ElBaradei and the International Atomic Energy Agency, we have reason to believe there is still time for diplomacy. Diplomacy requires the parties to be tough-minded and creative. U.S. representation at the recent Geneva meeting was a positive step, and Condoleezza Rice should be lauded for breaking with twenty-eight years of American conventional wisdom when she advised negotiating with Iran. That diplomatic opening is still there, and it would be folly to give it up now. All options must be kept on the table in order to force Tehran to respond to international objections. At this point, however, war with Iran is neither inevitable nor desirable.

A significant difficulty with Iran is that the relationship between Washington and Tehran, unlike Pyongyang and Havana, has been completely nonexistent. The United States has not had any permanent media correspondents, businessmen, or diplomats in the country since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. As a result, the two countries know nothing about each other. Another difficulty is the history of grievances between the two, such as the Mossadeq coup and the Iranian hostage crisis. In order to develop relations, however, both need to stop focusing on this legacy of bitterness and look forward to the future.

The situation may change when Iran holds presidential elections in 2009, because the country is not a political monolith. Although Ayatollah Ali Khamenei exercises a great deal of control, there are still relative differences between him, Ahmadinezhad, Ali Larijani (speaker of the Iranian parliament), and other influential Iranians, such as former presidents Ali Akbar Rafsanjani and Muhammad Khatami.

Iranians have been equivocating, even though reasonable proposals have been on the table for two years. The United States backed Russia's proposal that Iran be provided with nuclear power plants and fuel, thereby invalidating the claim that the world wants to deny Iran atomic energy. The Iranians need to answer the questions being asked about its nuclear program by the international community. At the present, the ball is in Iran's court.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Lauren Cohen.

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