

PolicyWatch #1622 : Special Forum Report

## The Iranian Opposition, the Nuclear Issue, and the West

Featuring [Patrick Clawson](#) and Ray Takeyh  
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*On January 14, 2010, Patrick Clawson and Ray Takeyh addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss the twin challenges of resolving the nuclear impasse with Iran and responding to its ongoing domestic protests. Dr. Clawson is deputy director for research at the Institute, where he heads the Iran Security Initiative; he is author of the just-released Institute study Much Traction from Measured Steps: The Iranian Opposition, the Nuclear Issue, and the West. Dr. Takeyh is a senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, specializing in Iran, the Persian Gulf, and U.S. foreign policy; his publications include The Guardians of the Revolution: Iran's Approach to the World (2009).*

### Patrick Clawson

In the wake of Iran's June 2009 presidential election and the development of an opposition movement, analysts are confronted with two questions: What impact will international diplomacy regarding the nuclear issue have on Iran's domestic politics? And what impact will Iran's domestic politics have on the issues of most concern to the international community? The newly released Washington Institute report Much Traction from Measured Steps offers good, bad, and mixed answers.

The bad news is that the opposition Green Movement's objectives differ fundamentally from those of the international community. The movement cares more about domestic policy than foreign policy, and its leaders are willing to seize upon any issue -- even a nuclear deal brokered between Iran and the P5 + 1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, Britain, and the United States) -- to criticize the government. Although the nuclear effort is low on its list of priorities and would likely be abandoned if it came to power, due to its association with Ahmadinezhad, ending the nuclear program would not be easy in practice. If the regime collapsed and was replaced by reformers, Washington would be pressured to settle the matter quickly and be accommodating, while Iran's new leaders would be expected to deliver something beyond what might have been expected of Ahmadinezhad. A more probable scenario for a Green victory would be a grand compromise in which Ayatollah Ali Khamenei retains power and there is gradual change over time, with the nuclear program perhaps remaining intact.

The mixed news is that the government is completely occupied with the unfolding domestic unrest. The regime has long been deeply paranoid about the prospect of a velvet revolution, and now its fears have materialized in the form of real enemies, with the formerly loyal opposition becoming a disloyal one. The most important question here is not whether the Greens will come to power, but whether the regime is worried about the movement, and the answer is yes. The positive result of this fear is that it motivates the regime to prevent a two-front war, so to speak, by making nuclear concessions to the international community. Last summer, for example, Iran opened the Arak reactor to inspectors, agreed to additional cameras at the Natanz facilities, and accepted the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) deal. But the negative result is that it is very difficult to get decisions made in this new environment. The political deadlock means that the most likely scenario is for the regime to do nothing. Although Ahmadinezhad would like to engage with the West and strike a deal that will enhance his legitimacy, Khamenei is convinced that such negotiations are pointless and that Washington's actual goal is to overthrow the regime.

The good news is that despite the differences between the Green Movement and the international community, modest steps can be taken to align them. For example, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is deeply involved in both the nuclear program and the suppression of protesters. Washington could therefore frame sanctions against this force in the UN Security Council as targeting Iran's continued nuclear noncooperation, while afterward hinting to the world that the real issue is human rights. It could also use Persian-language media outlets to explain that negotiations with Tehran are not intended to shore up the regime's legitimacy but rather to end Iran's isolation, thereby removing a major barrier to improved relations. Although direct U.S. support to the Iranian people is not realistic due to the deep unpopularity of such efforts in both countries, Washington could allow nongovernmental organizations to provide direct aid. For example, it could lift the regulation prohibiting such organizations from giving satellite phones to Iranians.

As for sanctions, the Green Movement members interviewed for the Institute's latest report had mixed views on the subject. Although there was consensus in support of human rights sanctions, broader sanctions were not as popular, although some members would support them if they could produce short-term results. From the U.S. perspective, sanctions on dual-use items play an important role in slowing Iran's nuclear program. Moreover, Washington and its partners could make the current sanctions much more effective if they pursued technical and intelligence cooperation with the less-developed countries that Iran uses as intermediaries.

Overall, the international community should proceed with caution in nuclear negotiations with Iran, especially with regard to making hasty concessions. Tehran has had the opportunity to make a nuclear deal in the past and chose not to. Although the international community would likely agree to a TRR deal on a much larger scale, it should be leery of rushing to make such an offer because the Iranians could come back and ask for more. In addition, any deal with the current regime would be seen as a victory for Ahmadinezhad, who campaigned on the platform that his predecessors were too accommodating to the West and that better terms could be had through a more confrontational approach. A deal now would only legitimize this approach, encourage him to be more defiant, and weaken the opposition's arguments domestically.

## **Ray Takeyh**

Iran is facing two domestic problems -- elite fragmentation and popular unrest -- and their relation to each other is not always clear. Khamenei could probably reassemble the elites by acceding to some of the demands made by reformist leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi, but he is disinclined to do so out of fear that it would be the beginning of the end for his regime. After becoming Supreme Leader in 1989, Khamenei steadily empowered conservatives who were beholden to him, culminating in Ahmadinezhad's 2005 election. Since the June 2009 election, he has had the opportunity to renegotiate this setup and bring reformers and moderates into the government, but he has chosen not to. Even if he were to make such a compromise, it might not diminish popular resentment. Mousavi and Karrubi's control over what occurs on the streets is questionable -- they are often observers themselves. To deal with the unrest, Khamenei has instead chosen a policy of containment, arresting individuals with popular appeal while escalating the government's violence against demonstrators. This policy reached a turning point with the use of live ammunition by security forces, which has the potential to radicalize the opposition. And it is unclear whether Iran's security forces have the capacity to maintain the current approach on a larger scale. Amid this domestic strife, Iran lacks a unified foreign policy. Ahmadinezhad is the principal advocate for nuclear negotiations, while Khamenei strongly opposes them. Because domestic developments take precedence, Tehran has few incentives to work with the international community, as negotiations would do little to quell domestic unrest or solidify the regime's standing. Thus, the immediate future of negotiations is uncertain. There is little assurance that continued internal unrest will produce a more pragmatic foreign policy, and it is unclear what the next step would be if Tehran agreed to a modified deal as part of the ongoing discussions in Vienna. Sanctions would not alter the regime's short-term objectives, only its tactics. And the IRGC is so well embedded in the Iranian economy that sanctions against the regime would likely harm the democratic movement as well. Without a better alternative, however, sanctions are a useful option if negotiations continue to stall.

Washington should not attempt to transform the U.S.-Iranian relationship as long as the current regime is in

power. There is no point in being respectful to a regime that has lost the respect of its own people. The United States can pursue a transactional relationship with Iran while still voicing criticisms on human rights. And any nuclear deal should involve more than just agreements on technology -- it should also force Tehran to meet other international obligations, namely, ending its support for terrorist organizations. A nuclear deal could also be conditioned to include some of the regime's specific domestic practices.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Max Mealy.*

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