

Summary of the roundtable discussion “*Dealing with the Iranian Nuclear Program – the Negotiation Process within the UN Security Council*” at the German House in New York, 9 October 2007

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The roundtable discussion “Dealing with the Iranian Nuclear Program – the Negotiation Process within the UN Security Council” organized in cooperation with the Aspen Institute Berlin and held on 9 October 2007 at the German House in New York, focused on a number of points that will be summarized below.¹

Consensus existed among the participants that the power and conflict structures in the Middle East have undergone **a tectonic shift since the war in Iraq**. Iranian-Arab rivalry has supplanted the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that was the focus of tensions a few years ago. The regional dimension is therefore very significant. Unlike their populations, the governments of Arab states are observing Iranian efforts toward regional dominance with growing unease. Iran’s entanglement in the various centers of conflict in the region such as Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine has made it impossible to work toward solutions as long as individual problem fields are addressed in an isolated manner. One participant, however, held that the nuclear issue must be seen as distinct from the region’s problems, as the nuclear program has long been a part of Iran’s foreign policy strategy; such a view is essential to a better understanding of Iran’s hegemonic ambitions.

The participants deemed **perceptions within the region** to be very important. Several participants underscored the perceived threat within the Arab world in general and the governments of Arab states in particular, with the latter anticipating an attack on Iran by the United States at any time. According to the views of individual members of Arab governments, Iran is an enemy that emerged strengthened by the war in Iraq, representing a threat that cannot be contained by sanctions and diplomacy, thus making a military conflict inevitable. One participant asserted that ever since the revolution, the Iranian regime has been intent on fighting out its conflict with the USA outside of its own territory; therefore the participant saw no chance of a recognition of the Islamic Republic by the United States. Another participant emphasized that such differences in perception impede a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

A further focal point was the question of whether **security guarantees for Iran by the United States** would improve the current situation. This was the subject of considerable controversy. One participant pointed out that under the present circumstances, no US government would be in a position to offer Iran security guarantees. As reasons the participant cited Iran’s alleged efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction, its support for terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas and its involvement in Iraq. Nevertheless, the participant viewed security guarantees as a precondition for rapprochement and the resolution of the conflict in the long term, as Iran is not particularly interested in other concessions. One participant contradicted that view, pointing out North Korea as an example of a regime that remains discontent despite security guarantees and further questioned whether security issues are the Iranian’s sole motive. The Iranians had publicly stated their disinterest in security guarantees on several occasions. Other participants disagreed, citing non-official communications with responsible Iranians.

The discussion of the need for security guarantees led to the question of **whether the Iranian regime itself is the issue**, or merely the Iranian nuclear program. A wide range of views were expressed on that topic. One participant characterized this distinction as the primary problem of the negotiations and condemned calls from parts of the United States government for a regime change. The participant called for the US to fully recognize Iran. An honest answer is needed for the question why Iran should

¹The topics mentioned arose throughout the discussion. This document therefore should not be deemed a chronological account of the discussion, nor were the points necessarily raised as direct responses to previous speakers.

be denied nuclear weapons in light of its nuclear-armed neighbors. Two other participants expressed the view that the Iranian regime is the actual problem, speaking out against security guarantees and advocating stricter sanctions. In their view, the Iranian regime is destabilizing the region and its representatives are responsible for completely unacceptable pronouncements. Another participant pointed out the need to promote mutual trust, a crucial precondition for the desired political solution.

A further focal point of the discussion was the degree to which the **Iraq conflict** is aggravating the situation in the region. One participant pointed out the fallacy of the Iraq Study Group in depicting Iraq's neighbors as being interested in regional stability and peace. It has become apparent in many non-official talks in the region that a number of states are promoting a state of calculated chaos and actively supporting the insurgents. A further participant underscored that some members of the Bush administration still advocate a military strike. Events in Iraq could provide a justification for such action, as the democratically controlled US Congress would not support a direct declaration of war. The participant also emphasized that the US accusation of Iranian interference in Iraq demonstrates a lack of historical awareness, ignoring the decades-old ties between Iran and the Iraqi Shiite militias. Another participant expressed the conviction that the Iranian regime would not risk a war over the nuclear issue. The current US-Iranian tension over Iraq is a dangerous development, however, prompting serious concern over a possible military conflict between Iran and the USA.

With regard to **sanctions**, the majority of the participants deemed them to be more of a symbolic nature than of true economic significance. One participant described the current sanctions as appropriate in that they are gradually tightening the screw and are effective in ways in which the responsible parties in Iran would feel the pain. With regard to the outlook for a possible transatlantic strategy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran, the participant pointed out the difficulty of keeping Russia and China on board. Effective sanctions cannot be realized by a “coalition of the willing”. A number of participants were confident that a new resolution with sanctions would be passed sooner rather than later. In this regard, it would be necessary to wait for Solana's negotiations and the IAEA report in November. The participants did not generally support further-reaching sanctions, however. One participant expressed the conviction that it would not be possible to influence the Iranian position with sanctions.

With regard to the **negotiations in New York**, a number of participants warned against delaying action on the Iranian nuclear program. Two participants warned that the current window of opportunity for negotiations with Iran could close in the near future as soon as the nuclear program reaches a breakthrough. In this context, a further participant pointed out the significance of means and objectives in the negotiation process. The objective is clearly a stable and peaceful region, not an end to Iranian enrichment. That objective must be taken into account in the time window for the negotiations. One participant nevertheless noted that one cannot be certain whether the Iranian leadership would not actually prefer the Japanese model or another nuclear model over the military option.² A firm decision about the actual nature of the nuclear program may not necessarily have been made at this point. With regard to the position toward Iran within the EU and among the European representatives in the UN Security Council, the participant emphasized that the three European representatives are in agreement, and that they agree to a greater extent with one another than with the three other Security Council members.

In the question of **approaches to resolve the conflict** over the Iranian nuclear program, one participant presented a pessimistic outlook for the entire region. Unfortunately, the planned international conference for the Middle East is not significant in this respect, as even a successful negotiation result would not bring about lasting stability if the truly influential regional forces are not at the table. One participant called for a change in America's strategy toward Iran on a scale last seen

²The Japanese model is generally characterized as a country using nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, yet keeping all of its options open to produce nuclear weapons on very short notice.

in the 1970s in the transformation of America's relations to China. Otherwise, the conflict would remain insurmountable.

Another participant expressed a cautiously optimistic view based on the narrower frame of reference of negotiations with the Iranian leadership. Integrating Iran in negotiations and building mutual trust while continuing to pressure the regime would be the right approach. For example, a UN resolution on the Holocaust would exert pressure on the Iranian representatives in New York and within Iran itself. In the long term, however, a process comparable to that of the OSCE is needed in the region.

One interesting aspect of the discussion was the fact that Iran's domestic policy situation remained virtually unexamined. The positions of Russia and China also played a secondary role, as the participants remained reserved with regard to details of the negotiation process in New York. The mixture of transatlantic perspectives was successful, highlighting differences such as the apparent gulf between the Italian and French positions. Rather than merely covering technical details of the Iranian nuclear program, the event prompted an intensive discussion featuring current analyses of the entire region.