

Summary of the roundtable discussion “*Dealing with the Iranian Nuclear Program*” at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv, 13 January 2008

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The roundtable discussion at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv started with two speakers giving short input presentations followed by an open discussion.

The first speaker gave an analysis on domestic US politics emphasizing that its current Iran policy is viewed entirely through the prism of Iraq. The NIE report itself has to be understood as a response by the US intelligence community to the abuse of intelligence information in the run-up to the Iraq war. In addition, the checks and balances of the US system are in place again with the Supreme Court and Congress limiting the President’s foreign policy power. Even Republican lawmakers are now threatening impeachment, if the Bush administration were to attack Iran without congressional approval. Due to a weak outgoing US Presidency, the Iranian nuclear program will be the most pressing foreign policy issue for the next US President starting in early 2009. Finding a third way between bombing Iran or appeasing it will require stronger transatlantic cooperation. Contrary to how it is commonly portrayed, the US is the actor carrying the bigger carrots (such as direct talks about recognition, a nonaggression pact and investment flows), while the Europeans have the bigger sticks (such as German and Italian investment in particular). Both Europeans “sticks” and US “carrots” need to be applied. Without Russian and Chinese buy-in, however, the likelihood of success is limited. Nevertheless, the speaker emphasized that the existing sense of urgency in the US government has to be seized during 2008. The window of opportunity for a new approach will close half a year after the new US administration is in place. For a successful approach, the existing checks and balances in the Iranian system have to be engaged as well. The transatlantic community should try to change the calculations of the key players within the Iranian decision-making system and convey a united message about the dire consequences of an Iranian refusal to make a deal on this issue.

The second speaker analyzed the NIE report’s implications in general and for Israel in particular emphasizing that the NIE report represents the most important document on the Iranian nuclear program in recent years. Its analysis not only changes the timetable for negotiations but also questions the ultimate desire of the Iranians to acquire the bomb. The speaker stressed that the NIE report’s conclusions make it impossible for any US administration to attack Iran. It also weakens the rationale for tougher sanctions among the international community and Russia and China in particular. However, one should remain concerned that Iran was able to hide its nuclear weapons program until 2003. It will be difficult to know if and when the Iranian leadership decides to resume the program. Moreover, the ongoing existence of the civilian nuclear program and the ongoing enrichment of uranium and fissile material are distressing, since these elements constitute the most important prerequisites for a nuclear weapons capability. On the issue of negotiations, the speaker underlined that despite a history of mutual suspicion and internal constraints on both sides, direct US-Iranian negotiations are needed. The fact that the US has nothing new to bring to the negotiating table could however constitute a challenge for direct negotiations. The speaker refuted the notion that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is interlinked with the Iranian nuclear weapons program: Iran will try to go nuclear whether there is a peace treaty with the Palestinians and the Arab States or not. At the same time, Iran will also continue to confront Israel by asymmetric means. A peace treaty would however change the context for the Iranians making it more difficult to attack Israel.

Following the input presentations an open debate began on a number of topics summarized below:

The view on the US role after the NIE report

With regard to the US role after the NIE report, a majority of the participants agreed with the first speaker's assessment that the US administration will now have a hard time uniting the international community behind a hard position on Iran. One participant even indicated that some in the US would like Israel to forget about a military option and accept an Iranian nuclear bomb. Another participant emphasized the importance of understanding the "Iraq prism" in the US domestic debate, but acknowledged that there had been a shift away from bellicose rhetoric. Others were less convinced that the internal US debate had switched towards a non-military solution; they pointed to the fallacy of talking exclusively to liberal counterparts in the US. Another participant noted the weakening of the US strategic position in the Middle East in relation to Iran due to its engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan; the participant stressed that the US is in dire need of Iranian cooperation in Iraq to make the surge work. Moreover, the success of the US engagement in Afghanistan was also related to Iranian cooperation and the Iranian side would still be awaiting a reward.

The debate revealed tension between the weakened international and regional US leverage after the NIE report and the continued importance of direct US-Iranian negotiations. Some even argued that direct US-Iranian negotiations should have started a long time ago. At least two participants emphasized the need for the US administration to make concessions to Russia and China: as long as Russia is confronted over its lack of democracy and human rights deficits and threatened by a US missile defense shield, it will never give in to US demands on the Iranian nuclear program. One participant took a broader view questioning the ability of the West in general and the US in particular to dictate its terms to the rest of the world in the 21st century and pointed to the need to strive for more cooperative ways in dealing with conflicts.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict vs. the regional context

The question about a possible link between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and how to deal with the Iranian nuclear program sparked a lively debate among the participants. Some stressed that by finding a solution with the Arab moderate Sunni countries, Israel could weaken Iran. One participant argued that by announcing a visit to the region one day after the release of the NIE report, President Bush made an attempt to connect both issues. The underlying rationale would be that a US-led military strike on Iran would make it easier for Bush and Olmert to convince their domestic constituencies of an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. Others refuted the notion of a link completely by pointing to the importance of regional dynamics instead of the narrow Israeli-Palestinian prism. Following those remarks, the debate shifted to a focus on the broader regional context of the Iranian nuclear program. One participant questioned the fact that Iran's nuclear capabilities are directed against Israel only: With its long-range missile program and a possible nuclear weapons capability, Iran will constitute a threat to Europe and other regions as well.

Others were critical of the usefulness (and likeliness) of an Israeli-Arab alliance against Iran. Much more emphasis should be placed on the Arab-Iranian and the Sunni-Shia rift. In this view, Saudi-Arabia's attempt to bring together Hamas and Fatah in March 2007 was not primarily intended to benefit the peace process but to strengthen the anti-Iranian alliance among the Arabs. Even though not all participants shared this view, most agreed that the Iranian quest for regional dominance is perceived as a threat by the Arab states. The disagreement centered on the extent to which the latter are trying to counter-balance Iranian hegemony. Some participants viewed the recent invitation of President Ahmadinejad to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and to Mecca as a sign of the acceptance of Iran as a local superpower and an attempt to embrace this unavoidable reality. Others disagreed pointing to the involvement of Arab governments on the side of Sunni insurgents and Al-Qaeda in Iraq as evidence that the Arab Sunni states will never accept a Shia-dominated Iraq. At the same time, one participant mentioned that some of these very governments are secretly hoping that the US will contain Iran militarily.

The debate on a possible linkage between an Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iranian nuclear program quickly turned into a regional assessment of the implications of Iranian dominance in the Middle East in general and in Iraq in particular. There was less clarity about how important nuclear weapons actually are for Iran's regional dominance. Some participants pointed out that Iran's dominance is already a reality and that its theological influence in the Shia revival is taking place in the region independent from the Iranian nuclear weapons program. However, there was agreement on the perils of nuclear proliferation in the region, and the recent French initiative in the proliferation of civilian nuclear energy was seen with skepticism in this regard.

What can be expected from the Iranian regime?

Another part of the debate centered on how to analyze the Iranian regime's intentions and interpret its political system. There was substantial disagreement over the weight of the Iranian President in the political system, the role of elections in Iranian foreign policy, and the role of the Supreme Leader.

One participant opened the debate on this topic by pointing to three possible (and complementary) explanations for the Iranian quest for nuclear weapons. Besides wanting to become the major regional power in the Persian Gulf since the time of the Shah, the Iranian rationale could be to establish a nuclear balance to Israel, Pakistan, and India. A third possible explanation could be the desire to deter a US invasion. If these explanations were accurate, the Iranian nuclear program could be deterred by rational means and negotiations. However, an Iran with the true intention of being a revolutionary power and trying to use the bomb to protect and advance its aggressive regime change policy in the region would render negotiations obsolete.

The difficulty of analyzing the intentions of the Iranian regime became obvious in the subsequent debate. A number of participants viewed Iran's nuclear ambitions as a struggle for Islamic leadership and stressed the need to be cautious about the rise of the conservative faction with its messianic and even apocalyptic ideology. President Ahmadinejad has so far been the only Iranian president who became more belligerent once coming to power. The Supreme Leader and former president Rafsanjani might not share his outspoken belligerent rhetoric but definitely his views. Others disagreed, pointing to the long history of the Iranian nuclear program which predates the Islamic Republic. One should keep President Ahmadinejad's role in perspective; his belligerent rhetoric could be interpreted as a sign of internal weakness. In this view, there is ample evidence for the existence of checks and balances within the Iranian power structure. The Supreme Leader's recent comments on a possible US-Iranian dialogue are to be analyzed in this context. Thus the obsession with the current Iranian president fails to recognize that his speeches are directed at the Arab world rather than giving an insight into Iran's foreign policy agenda.

Another point of contention was the impact of elections on Iran's foreign policy. Some participants were optimistic about possible changes following the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in Iran in early 2008 and 2009. Others refuted the idea that elections can have an impact on Iranian foreign policy, pointing to the relatively moderate Chatami years which saw an ongoing secret nuclear program. One participant was hopeful about an ultimate Iranian democratization from within. But it was also pointed out that unfortunately, a strategy could not be based on hope alone.

What should Israel do?

The question on Israel's role in dealing with the Iranian nuclear program was discussed on and off during the whole debate. As already mentioned, most participants agreed on the necessity of direct US-Iranian negotiations. Some even went further in saying that the Israeli government should lobby the US to start a direct channel for negotiations soon. In addition, the same participants stressed the need for a direct (possibly secret) Israeli-Iranian dialogue if

only to lower the tensions between the two countries. With reference to the Israeli-Iranian ties until 1979, one participant described the current Israeli-Iranian relations as a deviation stressing that the two countries should be friends. Another participant pointed to a different possible strategy for Israel; it could use the Syrian channel and try to disrupt the Syrian-Iranian axis.

The participants at the debate as well as the speaker of the public discussion on the same day made clear that Israel should not employ public pressure on other governments concerning Iran. An aggressive public diplomacy by Israel would put other governments under pressure from their own constituencies on the one hand and narrow the perception of the Iranian nuclear program to an Israeli-Iranian conflict on the other.

Sanctions, Negotiations and the Importance of Timing

At the beginning of the debate, one participant pointed to the importance of details (mechanics) when addressing the issue of sanctions and negotiations: the two central questions are how to determine if Iran is living up to its promises on the one hand, and to determine the effectiveness of sanctions on the other. Both questions have been difficult to answer in the past and are unlikely to be resolved in the future. Others were pessimistic about the chance for meaningful sanctions in the first place, citing Germany and Italy's lack of enthusiasm about applying substantial economic pressure if Russia and China would consequently replace them as major investors in Iran. In addition, some participants stressed that sanctions could only work if accompanied by positive inducements such as the recognition of the Islamic Republic by the US. Opponents of this view emphasized the regional implications of US recognition of Iran and its power status for the Arab states.

Even though most participants agreed on the necessity of a dialogue between the international community (mainly the US) and Iran, there was disagreement over whether it should be employed with the intent to change the Iranian regime's decision to pursue a nuclear weapons capability or rather to weaken President Ahmadinejad. Waiting for new elements to rise within the Iranian political system was also raised as a possible tactic. One participant emphasized the need for an increased dialogue with the Iranian people as allies in the search for a solution for the Iranian nuclear program. Even if negotiations with the Iranian government turn out to be unsuccessful, the Iranian people should know who is to blame for a failure.

Some participants warned that a dialogue with the Iranian government could be a painful and long process without results. The assumption that a "deal" with the Iranians was possible in the first place could be challenged. They also mentioned the poor record of previous years of talks with Iran and stressed that time was playing into Iran's hands. Serious negotiations in any case could not start before mid-2009 due to both the US and the Iranian election calendars. Moreover, since the Iranians will not start negotiations without continuing their nuclear enrichment, the option to bomb nuclear facilities will decrease. While some participants saw the electoral calendars in the US and Iran as a window of opportunity for a new approach others had resigned to the fact that in ten years, there will be an Iranian bomb if the regime stays in power—even with a military strikes.

Changing Iran's national interest? Options for the international community

For the majority of participants, an answer to the question of how to deal with the Iranian nuclear program was to find out about Iran's national interests and try to change its rational calculations. Engaging Iran in direct negotiations on a broad range of issues with the US and Europe is the best way to test Iranian intentions. Here again, the question of details (mechanics) will play a significant role. If the negotiations were to fail, one could turn to other measures but it would be known whether Iran is ready for a compromise with regard to its own national interests. Moreover, as one participant pointed out, negotiations and a possible US-Iranian nonaggression pact are also a way to hold the transatlantic community

together. Other participants were uncertain about the kind of incentives that will make the Iranian regime reconsider and end its nuclear program. They emphasized that only the US invasion of Iraq had prompted the Iranians to stop their secretive nuclear weapons program. Changing the Iranian national interest by using incentives could turn out to be difficult since many incentives have already been on the table.

One participant also pointed to a tension in the Iranian position that could be of use to the international community: while the Iranians often try to provoke the international community, they are also interested in being a respected part of it. More thinking should go into how to exploit this internal contradiction in the Iranian position.

With regard to the military option, most participants agreed that its effectiveness was rather uncertain and could have dangerous repercussions in the region. However, as one participant pointed out, one could hit some of Iran's military training camps at the Iraqi border "by accident" which would send a strong message to the regime about the Western determination.

Summary and Conclusion

The debate at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv took place in view of the NIE report and the recent US diplomatic engagement for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The majority of participants agreed that a US military attack on Iran would be highly unlikely in the near future and were mostly in favor of direct US-Iranian negotiations. A few participants pointed to the need for concessions to Russia and China to strengthen the international community's resolve. Even though the linkage between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iranian nuclear program was debated at length, the majority view opted against a direct connection and thus a directly positive result of a peace treaty. Much more emphasis was laid on the regional implication of Iranian and Shia hegemony with its ramifications for the situation in the Gulf States and in Iraq. It was, however, unclear whether Iran's regional dominance is already the status quo and whether it would increase or decrease with a regional nuclear arms race.

Another interesting divide was the question of how to interpret the opaque Iranian political system and the impact of elections on its foreign policy. On whether Iran is a revolutionary state or a state with rational national interests, the participants tended to favor the latter view. The implication of a nuclear arms race in the region and an Iranian threat by the use of asymmetric warfare seemed to be of far more relevance than a direct Iranian nuclear threat to Israel. A remarkable fact was the suggestion by a few participants that the Israeli government should lobby the US for direct negotiations with Iran. The importance of the details of potential negotiations and the challenge of determining Iranian compliance with sanctions reappeared throughout the debate.