



Are We Misreading Iran's Nuclear Politics?

Vali Nasr , Fatemeh Haghighatjoo

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[Vali Nasr](#)

- [Introduction](#)
- [Vali Nasr](#)
- [Fatemeh Haghighatjoo](#)
- [Questions and Answers](#)

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good afternoon. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs. On behalf of the Carnegie Council, I'd like to thank you all for joining us this afternoon as we welcome a group of very distinguished speakers, who I know will provide us with an excellent foundation for our discussion about Iranian nuclear politics.



[Fatemeh Haghighatjoo](#)

As Iran vigorously defends its right to develop a nuclear program free from international control, [President Ahmadinejad](#) argues that Iran's recent success in producing enriched uranium to reactor-grade level is purely for civil needs and is aimed only at generating power. But in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, there is growing fear that this research program is, in fact, a cover for the development of nuclear weapons, fostering concerns about the potential security threat that this Islamic republic poses to the rest of the world.

Yet diplomatic efforts to defuse this gathering storm seem to be at a standstill, which in turn raises questions about the rationale behind Iran's nuclear program and its standoff with the West.

One way of looking at this impasse is to see it as a confrontation between the Muslim world and the West, where a Muslim leader shows that he is not afraid to stand up to America and Europe. Certainly for Mr. Ahmadinejad, not only has his anti-American rhetoric shown that he is able to impress those on the Arab street, but his bravado has also widened his appeal among leaders in the Muslim world, at least for the time being.

One could also view this stalemate as a way for Iran to protect itself, by bolstering its own security in a region where it is, itself, surrounded by neighboring threats.

Still, one could argue that the showdown between Iran and the West provides an opportunity for President Ahmadinejad to shore up his domestic political base as part of the internal power struggle which has pitted conservative forces against reformers. After all, didn't the 17 million people who elected this president do so with expectations that he would advance Iran's agenda on the international stage, especially its right to develop nuclear technology?

For a discussion of these issues, I'm extremely pleased to welcome a very renowned group of speakers. First, though, I would like to express my gratitude to John Tirman, who suggested that we host this panel and invited the individuals sitting on the dais with me. John will be our moderator, and he will introduce Fatemeh and Vali to us.

In the interest of time, I attached each of their bios for your perusal. I hope you've had a chance to read them. If not, please take them with you and read later, as each speaker is quite impressive, demonstrating vast experience and a wealth of knowledge about Iran and its politics.

Now it is my pleasure to present to you John, Vali, Fatemeh. Please join me in welcoming them to the Carnegie Council.

JOHN TIRMAN: Thank you very much. It's good to be here. I was here once eight or nine years ago, speaking about Turkey. It's nice to come back.

Just a couple of introductory remarks. We all know that Iran is now center-stage in global politics. We are here today to discuss a couple of aspects of that that don't often get the in-depth coverage and discussion that I think perhaps they should.

First of all, how are Iranian politics configured with respect to the global pressures being brought to bear on Tehran? Who is making decisions about nuclear development? What is the root of their thinking?

A second set of considerations: What do the Iranian people, civil society, and political parties make of the confrontation with the United States, Europe, and Israel? To what extent is the Iranian state a reflection of or isolated from broad public attitudes? Is there, as many in the West contend, a legitimacy crisis in Iran that is partly responsible for the state's apparent stubbornness on nuclear issues?

At [the MIT Center for International Studies](#), we have taken up these issues, among others, with the help of many scholars in Cambridge and elsewhere in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. We produce papers and reports, in addition to briefings for policymakers, public forums, and news media appearances. We have a variety of short briefing papers online, include three relevant to Iraq. There is also a report that we published on some workshops we did last year, at which Vali Nasr was one participant and [Gary Sick](#) was another. One section of this is on Iran, also available online.

Among the scholars we work with are the two today. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo is a visiting scholar at the center. She was a member of Iran's parliament from 2000 to 2004 and was widely known as a leader of the reform movement. She has been a valued member of the MIT community since arriving in September.

Vali Nasr is professor of national security studies at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. Vali holds his Ph.D. from MIT and has published widely on Iran, including two books that are coming out this year, one of them this week: [Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty](#), published by Oxford, and [The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future](#), to be published by Norton.

During the Q & A we will also have the benefit of a translator, Ali Mostashari, an old MIT friend, who will help Fatemeh a little bit.

With that, let me turn our program over to Vali Nasr.

Vali Nasr

Thank you, John, and thank you, Joanne, for your introductions and for inviting me to this session. It's a great pleasure being here.

As you mentioned, we all know that Iran has fast become the primary foreign policy challenge facing the United States. The nuclear issue has escalated, and now the Iran file is sitting at the United Nations, and all kinds of scenarios are being debated.

This is a multifaceted subject. I won't go into every aspect of it, as I want to leave time for us to have a discussion. I want to focus on at least one question about what has changed since last year. Why, first of all, has the escalation occurred over the course of the past year? What has changed in the scenario that bears on whether or not it can be resolved?

In some ways, you could say nothing has changed, that Iran is determined to pursue the course of enrichment, whether for civilian or for military purposes, and the West is determined that all is negotiable other than enrichment on Iranian soil. Technically, you could say that the lines were drawn a long time back, and the two were set on a course that eventually would end up at the Security Council in the United Nations.

Alternatively, probably one of the most important developments is really the election in Iran last June of the president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, which has changed, if you will, the context very significantly. I think that, in large and small ways, is one of the reasons why we are where we are.

At the least, it has made Iran's case a lot more difficult internationally. Ahmadinejad's attacks on Israel, particularly beyond the traditional attacks on Israel to question to the Holocaust and the existence of the state of Israel, have made it more difficult to talk in a, quote/unquote, sanitized, rational way about whether or not Iran should have nuclear technology capability.

Beyond this, there are changes that also occurred as a consequence of Ahmadinejad taking over. One was the purge of the existing professionals, particularly within the Iranian Foreign Ministry, that were handling the nuclear negotiations. Actually, the demise of the professionals is reflected in many things, including the text of the letter that he wrote to the president, which clearly did not benefit from traditional diplomatic advice.

But beyond that, for instance, the group of Iranian ambassadors in Europe, who, in conjunction with the Iranian ambassador at the United Nations, were essentially the contact group with the Europeans—all were largely expelled, including the people under them. The sole survivor in this group was the current Iranian ambassador at the United Nations, but his influence was also largely dwarfed.

This obviously has changed the complete environment of decision making and the environment of negotiations.

There is a new team that has taken over, with a new attitude, with a new policy, and with very little experience either in foreign policy or in what has gone on.

Secondly, the entire approach that was adopted by Iran before June of 2005 was believed to have failed. The reason for that is that the Iranians put forward a proposal which detailed what they were willing to agree to, including intrusive inspections and snap inspections, but not giving up the right to enrich on Iranian soil. This proposal was given to the European Three who were engaged in negotiations with Iran.

The Europeans gave basically a two-page response, which did not engage any aspect of the proposal and was seen in Iran to have been written in a haughty, quote/unquote, colonial way. As a consequence, the Iranian pragmatic negotiators lost face. In fact, I remember one of them saying, "I don't know what the Europeans would have gained by essentially completely undermining the sensible pragmatics."

Essentially it was argued that a smiling face, a compromising face, is construed as weakness in the West and that only a tough stand, a hard-line stand, an unbending stand would get the West's attention. This in part had to do with the entire foreign policy changes that Ahmadinejad brought about.

Third, once he became president, even internally within Iran, a different political class took over. Ahmadinejad's backing comes from people who are not in the mainstream of Iranian society—marginal, fanatical, radical groups, war veterans, hard-line conservatives, ultra-nationalists. We have seen similar examples in Serbia, in Croatia, in other countries. They can change a country's foreign policy when they take over.

Additionally, he has a strong backing and relationship with the [Revolutionary Guards](#), which are a powerful ascendant military force in Iran and have their own views of what Iran's national security priorities ought to be. That is clearly reflected in the approach to negotiating with the West. In other words, the understanding initially was that Iran was not going to benefit from engagement from the West and it had to actually emphasize maximizing its position.

On this side of the world, there was a rapprochement, if you will, a fixing of the breach between Washington and Europe, even if it was superficial, after [Condoleezza Rice](#) took office. This had a bearing on the Iranian scene. At the same time as Iran's face was turning far more hard-line, Europe and the United States were burying the hatchet. Particularly in this regard, comments by the French president [Jacques Chirac](#), who, in a veiled way, threatened that if Iran was to use this nuclear technology in a wrong manner, France would see it appropriate to retaliate, were seen as a sign of the new trans-Atlantic agreement.

In many ways, in Iran this has increasingly translated into "no point in talking to the Europeans," and that Iran ought to vest its foreign policy on the East. In fact, it has been said that Ahmadinejad went to Indonesia right after he wrote the letter. This is a sign that that is where Iran should essentially anchor its boat. Things have changed in terms of its relationship with the West.

The "look-East" policy also got a boost from the United States-India deal. This is not only because the United States-India deal, in some ways, is predicated on not following up on the building of a gas pipeline, which Iran and India have been working on—in fact, just two days ago, the United States told Pakistan again that it should abandon the idea of building a gas pipeline that would run from Iran to India through Pakistan—but more importantly, because the United States-India deal, at least as it was viewed by Iranians, had certain opportunities in it. As one American observer said, the first outcome of the United States-India deal is that the

United States basically sold Pakistan and Iran to China.

Very clearly, the India deal has been marketed as a way of containing China. It's seen as an anti-Chinese deal, and therefore Iran sees this as an opportunity to build its relations with China. Iran had already been working on China and Russia, as, essentially, its safety valves at the United Nations, that they would exercise the veto. This became, if you will, more amplified.

Fourth is the perception of the weakening of the United States in Iraq. Throughout the summer of 2004, it was clear that the United States was getting more deeply mired in Iraq, that there was no way out. What's more, we already knew that the U.S. military had lost the appetite for any other ventures, if it actually had it in the first place, but the American public was losing the appetite or the belief that this can be done again or it can be done easily, in a relatively cost-free fashion.

In fact, one of the arguments of the hard-liners who came to power with Ahmadinejad was that Iran is at its strongest now and the United States is at its weakest now. In other words, the situation that existed in 2001 has been reversed, and this is the point where you don't want to settle cheaply or easily. You want to push, and you want to push hard, because the balance of power that exists at this moment in time favors Iran.

Next was that Ahmadinejad, whether intentionally or unintentionally, stumbled on a public relations bonanza. There are all kinds of debates about whether or not his very first statement questioning the Holocaust or wiping Israel off the map was sort of a shot in the dark—he said it, and then it had consequences that were unforeseen—or whether it was intended. Whether he intended it or not, it generated popularity on the Arab street in particular, where Iran has been vulnerable.

The rise of Ahmadinejad and Iran's nuclear strategy—and, generally, the rise of a much more powerful Iran after the fall of Iraq and the Taliban—has consolidated or hardened the Arab world against Iran. We have all seen what the king of Jordan said about the Shiite “crescent” and what President Mubarak said about Iranian power in the region. Iranians are very conscious of this, of trying to sort of minimize resistance from the Arab world to Iran's position, particularly at a time when it's going head to head with the United States over the nuclear issue.

Whereas the governments in the region are very solidly with the United States and opposed to Iran, the people in the Arab world and in the Muslim world are equivocating. It's not very clear where they stand. There are things they like about Iran and there are things they are afraid of about Iran. For instance, a recent poll done in the Arab world has shown that the Arab populations don't care or don't worry about Iranian nuclear weapons. They care about Iran's regional power, and particularly about the Shi'a-Sunni issue.

So the Iranians began to, if you will, mine the anti-Israel/anti-U.S. rhetoric as a way of creating a unified Muslim world behind Iran. It's the same policy they followed with the protest against the Danish cartoons. They have seen, increasingly, dividends in it.

Interestingly, there has been, you could say, a public relations competition between the United States and Iran over the hearts and minds of the Arab world and the Muslim world, with one difference—that the United States doesn't take it seriously and doesn't pay attention to it, whereas the Iranians are very focused on the public relations campaign. In some ways, if there is a logic to Ahmadinejad's rantings about Israel, it has to do with the fact that it plays very well on the Arab street and is very popular. It's the one thing that Iran is rather popular for over there.

But all of this said, there is also a domestic factor here. We shouldn't forget that Ahmadinejad is still consolidating his power. He is not firmly in the saddle. He is trying to build a base of support that is independent of those who helped him become president. He sees populism, he sees demagoguery, as the path forward.

Whereas we could have looked a year ago or six months ago and said that Iran is not ready to talk to the United States or does not want to talk to the United States, I think that has been resolved. (I remember after telling him the virtues of talking to Iran, a very senior American official saying to me, “I'm not sure they will even talk to us. Can you give any kind of a guarantee that actually if we pick up the phone, somebody's going to answer?”)

Iran is now been sending very, very clear signals, first over Iraq—which then was backed with a first-time pronouncement by the supreme leader in Iran that Iran wants to talk to the United States over Iraq—and now even in this sort of convoluted way, by the letter Ahmadinejad sent. Regardless of what he said, he has begun talking — except that he wants to first say what he wants to say, before he gets to anything substantive.

I think the lack of conversation is, itself, a major new factor that has been introduced into the process. Depending on how the United States responds to the letter-writing initiative, and in what form it does it and by

what means it does it, it's going to be key.

I will stop here and then we can follow up on anything later.

JOHN TIRMAN: Thank you very much, Vali.

We will turn to Fatemeh, who will read her remarks in Farsi, and Vali will translate.

Fatemeh Haghighatjoo

[Through an interpreter] Thank you very much.

The prospects of economic sanctions and military attack on Iran have led to a political movement in various political corners in Iran. One of the most notable events is that various political parties and political personages and leaders have been mobilizing. There is increasing debate and activity. They are showing reaction to the dynamics of Iran's case at the United Nations. Most notably, there are the beginnings of serious criticism of the way that the Iranian government is handling the nuclear file. The criticisms are not limited to reformers. What we are seeing are the beginnings of segments of the conservatives themselves criticizing the government on this issue as well.

The various parties that have joined the debate believe that the ultimate pressure that can change Iran's nuclear policy will come from within, not from without. They believe that they have to begin the process in order to impact the decision making. The former president, [Khatami](#), and the former head of Iran's Security Council, [Mr. Rohani](#), have both publicly criticized Ahmadinejad's government on its nuclear policy.

The immediate impact of this pressure from within could be that it can make a change in Iran's negotiating team with regard to the nuclear issue.

The second important issue is that the very referral of Iran's case to the United Nations has led to a change of tactics by the Iranian government in terms of its approach to the nuclear issue.

The former Revolutionary Guards commander, [Mohsen Rezaee](#), who is the deputy director of the National Expediency Council—which, parenthetically, is a very powerful council which is led by [Ayatollah Rafsanjani](#)—has recently conducted an interview that is a glimpse into the way in which the conservative elite are thinking about the issue. He says that Iran must be prepared both for negotiations and for exertion of outside pressure. He argues that Iran should talk to the United States, because if it doesn't, that means closing all avenues before the United States, which then might end up in a much more escalated situation. But he supports enrichment on Iranian soil and does not believe Iran should give that right up, because he believes capitulation on that issue will be construed as weakness and will only increase the amount of outside pressure on Iran.

In Rezaee's opinion, the purpose of Ahmadinejad's letter was to reduce the chances of the crisis escalating any further by impacting world public opinion. He adds that the letter was not written on Ahmadinejad's own initiative, but was discussed at the National Security Council and had the approval of [the Supreme Leader](#) [who is currently [Ali Khamenei](#)].

The Supreme Leader's speech in the city of Mashad is also indicative that Iran has now fully endorsed the prospect of talking to the United States for the first time after twenty-seven years. Irrespective of international and domestic reactions to the letter, its most important impact is that it has broken the taboo against talking directly to the United States. One can point to the example that during the second term of President Rafsanjani [1993-1997], his parliamentary deputy asked for talks with the United States and was confronted with massive demonstrations in Iranian universities denouncing him.

Although the United States has provided reasons why it would not respond to this letter, in Rezaee's opinion, the only solution to the crisis in Iranian-U.S. relations is direct negotiations. The first reason that the White House has put forward is that any kind of negotiation with Iran is futile. Although there are many reasons why negotiations over the nuclear issue have so far failed—including Ahmadinejad coming to power, sanctions, pressures, and red lines drawn by both sides—the single biggest reason why the negotiations have failed is the absence of the United States at the negotiating table.

The second reason that the White House has given for not answering the letter is that engaging Iran is tantamount to giving the regime in Iran legitimacy. Just the act of talking to a government can neither bestow nor take away legitimacy from a government. The United States talked to the government of Vietnam during the Vietnam War, it talked to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and it has had secret and high-level negotiations with Iran during recent history.

The mistake of the White House is that its only focus is Iran's nuclear technology development. Focusing on the nuclear issue has allowed the Islamic republic to create a nationalist fervor in the country around this issue. There is no similar kind of rallying together around either the human rights or democracy issue in Iran.

In his interview, Moshen Rezaee added that the United States' problem with Iran is around four issues: the nuclear issue, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and human rights. In his belief, Iran's best chance of standing up to the United States is on the nuclear issue. It would be far weaker to resist the United States on those other issues.

Rezaee argues that the real purpose of the United States is regime change in Iran, not the nuclear issue. Therefore, the greatest gain that Iran can have from negotiating with the United States is to divert the United States' position from regime change to focusing on specific issues of concern between the two countries.

Thank you very much.

Questions and Answers

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you. I think the speakers have laid a very constructive foundation. I'd like to open the floor to questions.

QUESTION: Thank you very much for a very fine presentation. Two questions, if I may.

First to Mr. Nasr: There was a recent indication that the two governments, the United States and Iran, were going to talk about Iraq, a few months ago. Then, when the government was formed in Iraq—or hopefully formed in Iraq—Iran, I believe, stated that they did not want to engage in those talks. My question is, if those talks were to take place, would it be wiser for the United States to broaden them? The United States had said they only wanted to talk about Iraq, and they would not talk about other issues.

Then I was going to ask Ms. Fatemeh about the reform movement amongst Muslim women. There have been, as you know, some very courageous Muslim women—a member of the Dutch parliament, and there's a Canadian professor at Yale, someone in Germany—that have discussed this. I would like to know something about the reform movement in Iran amongst the women.

VALI NASR: First, the United States suggested that they talk around Iraq. The Iranians didn't respond. Then the Iranians made the offer, and the United States didn't respond. [Ambassador Khalilzad](#) said that he didn't want to talk to Iran until there was a government, because the perception would be that they were trying to fix the government—which should have been the purpose of talking, actually, to fix things. Then the Iranians, once the government formed, basically said, "Now that there's a government, there's no need to talk."

But essentially it's because there is an absence of seriousness to talk.

I think the best reason why they should talk is that, first of all, because it's good for Iraq. It is not possible to solve Iraq's problems when the two biggest players in Iraq don't talk to each other, when the two that have the greatest number of assets and interests, with the largest majority of the population, try to ignore each other's presence.

Second, even if it doesn't broaden immediately to anything else, it is a confidence-building measure. There is a precedent for this. When Ambassador Khalilzad spoke with [Ambassador Zarif](#), the Iranian ambassador to the UN, in Bonn, Germany, when they were trying to put together the government of Afghanistan, it worked. Afghanistan is a success case because of the U.S.-Iranian cooperation. There is no other reason for it. It has nothing to do with special forces. It has nothing to do with Pakistan, which actually is still trying to undermine everything that is happening in Afghanistan. It is singularly because of the cooperation of the Iranians and the Americans, and the agreement that they made for the Iranians to bring the Northern Alliance and the Shi'a parties into the Karzai administration. Karzai would not have survived without Iranian help, because he didn't have the Pashtuns. Iranians provided stability for it to work.

At that time, people in the State Department said, "Great. We have one victory. Let's go talk about bigger things," and then the White House said, "No. We really don't want to have anything further. This was it."

A successful conversation in Iraq gets you to the next step. There is no silver bullet here. It took us twenty years to get arms reduction with the Soviet Union. You are not going to reverse twenty-seven years of hostile relations with one set of negotiations, but it could be a good beginning.

FATEMEH HAGHIGHATJOO: With regard to reform issues among Muslim women, it is important to note that there are different interpretations of Islam. There are some more narrow ones, which do not leave much space for reform, and there are broader, more flexible interpretations of Islam which allow for compatibility of women's rights with human rights. In Iran, particularly, women are very interested in promoting democratic interpretations of Islam and working within the existing system, focusing on the more democratic interpretations, in order to further women's rights. Unfortunately, these activities are limited to civil society, and women do not have a voice within the government or parliament to speak up on their behalf.

QUESTION: This is addressing either of our panelists.

Some commonly held opinions in the United States recently have been that the Iranian people really don't care a great deal about the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, nor about Israel's existence; secondly, that the Iranian people—and therefore, ultimately, the Iranian government—will arrive at a point where they don't care very much about nuclear weapons, or possessing them; and thirdly, that, also in the long run, Iran will move toward an identification with the West, both politically and socially.

I wonder if the panelists would agree with any of those.

VALI NASR: I think, on the first point, there are segments of the population which may have very strong opinions on the Arab-Israeli issue, and there are those who don't care. There are those who see it even as a strategic issue, as part of Iran's foreign policy objectives in the region.

But the rest of it is really a matter of time. I think personally that the Iranian society is probably the most democracy-ready, West-oriented, culturally vibrant society in the Middle East. Just look at Iranian cinema, for instance. You have that kind of productivity in various facets. In areas of life sciences, Iranian research centers rank very highly globally.

Going from that basis to an actually open democratic society is not necessarily automatic. It's going to take time, and it's going to depend on the conflicts, particularly the nuclear and how that's going to result.

QUESTION: Both presentations seem to put the onus on the United States to understand and/or figure out how to respond to what you describe as openings from Iran and open a dialogue that would go beyond the nuclear issue. Did I understand this properly? What could bring the United States to want to open up this broad dialogue with Iran?

From the other side, is there anyone who has the confidence of the new Iranian government that could play a role as intermediary for the opening of a dialogue with the United States?

VALI NASR: First of all, your impression is correct, but within a context. That does not mean that the Iranians don't have a responsibility in terms of deciding their fate.

The Iranians have written the first letter. So the question becomes whether you respond to it or not. That's a fact on the ground.

Actually, I don't believe there's a need for an intermediary. Obviously, the process already began by direct contact.

There's something important to notice about the U.S. approach to this from the beginning, which was that there are certain things we want Iranians to do. We don't want to ask them directly. We want others to ask them. We are not going to give any commitments, including even meeting or recognizing them, for them to do that. The Iranian position was recognition first, and then we can talk about everything else.

So in some ways, we are stuck on this issue. I personally believe that Iranians have had every incentive for everybody else to fail, because they want that there would be no option other than the Americans sitting at the table. So the question is, does the United States want to explore—it doesn't mean it is necessarily even going to yield results—does it want to explore this option, or is it going to insist that it wants Iran to give up nuclear technology, but it does not want to even meet with Iran?

For that very reason, the ball is in America's court, in some ways. Iranians have very clearly said that they want to talk. That does not mean that you are going to accept to talk to them under any terms or that you are going to listen to Ahmadinejad giving a harangue about world politics. But, ultimately, it comes down to whether or not the United States, as part of this process, would consider talking or not.

FATEMEH HAGHIGHATJOO: There's an issue of distrust on both sides that needs to be addressed at this point. I'm not a representative of the Iranian government. However, as an Iranian, I would actually see that

there have been a couple of issues on both sides. Of course, the hostage-taking crisis has been a major U.S. grievance against Iran. On the other hand, Iranians fought the United States with the 1953 coup against the democratically elected government at that time of [Dr. Mossadegh](#). Also the United States' support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War has been one of the major issues.

What is important that has happened in Iran is the breaking of the taboo against discussing things with the United States. There was a taboo in place before.

I also object to the content of President Ahmadinejad's letter, because there was no content. However, the issue is the intention, and the intention is a very explicit one of having negotiations. Since that letter has been written and that intention has been explicitly expressed, and officials at various levels have confirmed the Iranian commitment to negotiations, the ball is in America's court.

The other options that exist, including sanctions or potential military attacks, will only harm the Iranian people, not the Iranian government.

QUESTION: I think Professor Nasr put his finger on the underlying question of whether the U.S. government wants regime change or is concerned about the question of nuclear weapons. In the late 1990s, the leading neocons made it quite clear that they wanted regime change in Iran—years before the Iranian president's comments on Israel.

You mentioned the opening in the Iranian president's recent letter to George Bush. But weeks before that, the Iranian ambassador to the United Nations, Ambassador Zarif, wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* identifying ten specific points for enrichment verification, including such technical in-depth matters as international verification on the ground where low-grade enriched uranium would be pelletized, precluding enrichment to weapons-grade. Ambassador Bolton and the U.S. government have refused to respond to that. When the Iranian ambassador sent his letter, Bolton and Bush's response was, "Well, there were no specific proposals to respond to." But, in fact, in a top-of-the-page op-ed, there were specific proposals that were never responded to.

Getting back to your earlier point, do you actually believe, given the history, that this administration in the United States is going for regime change? If it is going to go to war with a country of 75 million people, what's the out; how does the rest of the world intervene to prevent that? The Russians have provided anti-aircraft missiles and weapons to Iran, presumably to stabilize and delay the process for war. But that's a rather drastic measure. What are the options in this circumstance?

VALI NASR: Your point is well-taken. That is actually what the Iranians believe. As you saw, the quotes from Moshen Rezaee pointed to that more colorful version, when Ahmadinejad said, "If we give in on the nuclear issue, they're going to ask for human rights. If we give in on human rights, they're going to ask for animal rights," by which he meant that there's a bigger agenda there.

Earlier on, the United States thought that regime change would solve the problem. So they didn't need to talk about the nuclear issue. They were going with a democracy in Iran, and when there was democracy in Iran, everything else will be solved.

When Ahmadinejad won the election, that option went away, but I think the U.S. policy has been confused since. In other words, on the one hand, there is this objective of promoting democracy, but it's mixed in with the short-term objective of fixing the nuclear issue. I think it sends the wrong signal, because it sends a signal that our interest in democracy is not really an interest in democracy, but an interest in the nuclear issue, and our interest in the nuclear issue is not really an interest in the nuclear issue, but an interest in regime change.

I think the worst part was to appropriate \$85 million in the middle of this crisis for democracy promotion, which is interpreted as an effort toward regime change.

When you don't respond or respond inappropriately to proposals that come, it does weaken people like Zarif, because the argument is that, "Well, okay, you gave your proposal, and this is the response you got. So let's not waste our time discussing what size the pellets would be or where they would be made."

Unfortunately, I think we are now stuck on a process that is going in the wrong direction. In other words, if the United Nations is not able to produce a result or if there is not an actual drastic shift in policy, which ultimately will involve some kind of negotiation, the military option is a very strong one, partly because the United States might paint itself in that corner or it might not see any other option.

I see that as a disaster, not only for Iran, but actually for the whole region. I think with any kind of a military strike on Iran, we're entering a completely unknown period. It's a country of 70 million people. There is no

successor to this regime right now. Chaos in Iran is going to make Iraq or Afghanistan look like child's play. This regime has a 25 percent base of solid support that is reflected in election after election. We really don't even have a guarantee that you can take the regime out, regardless of how hard you hit it.

The United States has the capability to start the war. It does not have the capability to finish the war. I think that's what the Iranians are hoping that the United States understands.

For the past two months, the Iranians have kept escalating, every week, Ahmadinejad making yet another claim about what they are willing to do and how close they are to it. The purpose was to tell the Americans, "Look, there is no option unless you sit down and talk." When the Americans wouldn't make the initiative, then they took the initiative and actually began talking. I think the Iranians are hoping that the United States will come to the conclusion that there is no other option but to talk to Iran.

But there are a lot of risks involved in that, because the United States may not get the message or it may misinterpret the message. In fact, there are people in America who are trying to read this letter into an outright declaration of war by Iran.

But some of the voices that Fatemeh was mentioning are also trying to question this. For instance, there was a very, very important op-ed by a former deputy foreign minister of Iran in the *Financial Times* on May 9. He began to argue in many veiled ways that maybe the tactic of trying to say you are closer to going past the point of no return is not necessarily a good thing. If you tell the Americans you really have only a year before Iran makes it and you had better talk, it may actually be counterproductive. You want to tell the United States, "We're fifteen years away."

In other words, everybody is nervous. I think the Iranians are preparing for war. If you look at the maneuvers in the Persian Gulf that the Iranian navy has been carrying out, launching new torpedoes and missiles and the like, it suggests that they are taking, if not a complete war, then a U.S. strike very seriously.

JOHN TIRMAN: I just want to emphasize one thing very quickly. We had a session at the United Nations this morning, too. There's a point that I think is very striking about the conversations we've been having, and that is this. We often wonder, when we read *The New York Times* and we see Iran has rejected yet again an overture from the European Three, what are they up to? Why are they rejecting these out of hand?

The point that has been made is that what they really want is this dialogue with the United States, and they want some security guarantees that the United States is not going to, militarily or otherwise, try to destabilize and replace the regime and a host of other issues of that kind. Then the nuclear issue becomes much more salient for all the parties and much more negotiable.

I think that's a very important insight, if indeed it's correct. It does, to use the basketball metaphor again, put the ball in the United States' court, in that the Bush administration really does have to decide whether or not it's regime change or something else that they are after, because they are sending mixed signals, and that's not allowing us to go anywhere.

QUESTION: Thanks for the talk. My question to the panel is, why is there an underlying assumption that a U.S. change-of-regime idea would work in Iran? I would just throw the general idea out. Why haven't they basically given an idea that it would work?

VALI NASR: For a while now, Iran has been tantalizing the United States with prospects of democracy. During the time that Fatemeh was in the parliament, during the reformist period, there was an expectation that there was going to be an opening. As I said, many things about Iran are right—education, literacy. One thing we forget is that this is the one country in the Middle East that is not only at least neutral towards the West, but that also is actually a very democratic country. The Iranians, even though they have a flawed democracy, have been voting for a very long time, and they take their voting very seriously. There are many things right about it.

But there is an assumption which comes from Iraq that you can jumpstart democracy through military intervention, which didn't work in Iraq. It actually provoked not democracy, but a nationalist reaction.

Some of these are being said about Iran. In other words, if you hit the instruments of control in Iran really hard — if you hit the Revolutionary Guards, if you hit the military — then they will lose control.

The second is that we always assume that just because conditions for democracy exist, it will necessarily happen. That's a huge assumption, and it might not hold.

FATEMEH HAGHIGHATJOO: I think the underlying rationale for the United States, and the motivation, is the interests that the United States can achieve by not having Iran's intervention in the region. The United States

understands the influence that Iran has in the Middle East process on the issue of oil, on the issue of political Islam. In all these three issues, the Iranian strategy is counter to that of the United States. The United States has apparently come to the conclusion that the change-of-behavior strategy is not working, so the change-of-regime strategy should be in place.

During the Clinton administration and its parallel, the Khatami administration in Iran, they were moving towards détente, but essentially there was a failure. It was aborted. It was a golden opportunity that was missed by both sides at that time, during the reformist era in Iran and also the Clinton administration. This had a major impact on where we are today.

JOANNE MYERS: Once again I'd like to thank you, Fatemeh, Vali, and John, for an excellent discussion.

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