

January 20, 2011

As the United States prepares for the upcoming round of multilateral talks with Iran, it is imperative that the Obama Administration reinvigorate its diplomacy by pursuing engagement with Tehran more persistently, setting realistic objectives, and broadening the US-Iranian dialogue. Diplomacy is the only sustainable means of preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, avoiding the dangerous folly of military confrontation in the Middle East, and enabling progress in other critical areas of US interest, such as Afghanistan and the human rights situation within Iran.

Reinvigorating diplomacy means seeking to engage Iran more persistently. The upcoming Istanbul meeting is only the fourth meeting on the nuclear issue involving both the United States and Iran, and no breakthrough can be expected without additional talks. Fortunately, time exists to pursue a diplomatic solution. Both US and Israeli officials have made public statements recently acknowledging that Iran remains years away from having the capability to construct a nuclear weapon.

Reinvigorating diplomacy also means pursuing realistic objectives. Unrealistic outcomes, such as insisting that Iran cease uranium enrichment entirely, however desirable, must be set aside. Focus should instead be placed on establishing monitoring and verification mechanisms that can ensure that Iran's nuclear program is, indeed, used solely for peaceful purposes. Secretary Clinton stated in December that the United States would be prepared to recognize a peaceful enrichment program on Iranian soil. This is a productive step to achieve a satisfactory compromise for which the Administration should be commended.

Finally, reinvigorating diplomacy means addressing issues with Iran beyond the nuclear file. Tehran presents challenges and opportunities in many other areas of importance to US national security, including the stability of Afghanistan and Iraq, drug trafficking, and the human rights situation in Iran itself. The US should seek common ground in all areas of interest and not hold progress in one area hostage to resolution of others. Indeed, progress on human rights or Afghanistan may create a better climate for progress on the nuclear issue. The US engagement agenda must be expanded to reflect this.

Diplomacy with Iran will not be easy and no quick fixes should be expected. Iran must also negotiate in earnest and make the serious compromises necessary for resolution of the nuclear issue. The concerns of the IAEA, the P5+1, and the international community more broadly must be addressed by Iran on the basis of transparency and cooperation. Resolving decades of enmity between the US and Iran will require that both sides work to create openings for successful engagement.

Only reinvigorated diplomacy holds the promise of bridging the many divides between the US and Iran and achieving a sustainable solution that prevents a disastrous military confrontation, prevents an Iranian bomb and the additional proliferation that would follow, and protects the human rights of the Iranian people.

Barry Blechman, co-founder, the Stimson Center  
Professor Juan Cole, University of Michigan

Sir Richard Dalton, Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London; Former British Ambassador to Iran

Debra DeLee, President and CEO, Americans for Peace Now

Jonathan W. Evans, Legislative Representative for Foreign Policy, Friends Committee on National Legislation

Professor Farideh Farhi, University of Hawaii

Chas W. Freeman, Jr., former Assistant Secretary of Defense, Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, and President, Middle East Policy Council

Lt. Gen. Robert G. Gard, Jr., (USA, Ret.) Chairman, Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation

Col. Sam Gardiner (USA, Ret.)

Daryl Kimball, Executive Director, Arms Control Association

Amb. John Limbert, Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State

Firuzeh Mahmoudi, Executive Director, United4Iran

Paul Kawika Martin, Policy Director, Peace Action

Stephen McInerney, Executive Director, Project on Middle East Democracy

Robert Naiman, Executive Director, Just Foreign Policy

Trita Parsi, President, National Iranian American Council

Bruno Pellaud, Former Deputy Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency

Professor Paul Pillar, Georgetown University

John Rainwater, Executive Director, Peace Action West

Rachelle Lyndaker Schlabach, Director, Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office

Professor Gary Sick, Columbia University

Professor John Tirman, Executive Director and Principal Research Scientist, MIT Center for International Studies