



Policy Forum Report  
*April 12, 2012*

**Background**

On April 12, 2012, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) and American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) convened a Policy Forum for key Congressional and Executive Branch staff and selected representatives of the American Muslim community to discuss the current situation in Iran. The following is a summary of the insights that emerged from the discussion.

**Key Issues**

***Nuclear Program***

Concern over whether Iran's nuclear program is intended for peaceful purposes or for developing a nuclear weapons capability continues to dominate US-Iranian relations. In 2005, Ayatollah Khamenei issued a *fatwa* stating that the production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons are all forbidden in Islam and that Iran shall never acquire these weapons (which continued the pattern of his predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini, who had issued a similar *fatwa*). During one discussant's visit to Iran in 2003, the Iranian leadership also expressed the understanding that using a nuclear weapon would invite devastating retaliation against Iran. However, as long as other nations have nuclear weapons, there is an incentive for Iran to pursue them, and fear of a pre-emptive strike only adds to the incentive to develop them as a deterrent. That most Iranians favor development of nuclear power in some form<sup>i</sup> further complicates the issue, which has become closely linked to nationalism.

Iran's recent signals that it would be willing to forgo enrichment beyond 5% if it is able to obtain a sufficient supply of 20%-enriched materials for medical purposes should be explored. The need to examine what security guarantees could be provided to Iran to reduce the sense of threat that inspires those who advocate nuclear weapons as a deterrent was also discussed.

***Human Rights***

The need to bring other issues beyond the nuclear question to the table—such as human rights issues—was put forth by some discussants. One participant echoed the UN Special Rapporteur's report, which stated that, "In the last year, Iran has continued to execute more people per capita than any other country in the world, increased arbitrary arrest of ethnic and religious minorities, and attempted to silence dissent through control of the media and the detention of journalists, opposition leaders and human rights defenders."<sup>ii</sup> It was noted that Iran's constitution provides protection for some minority religions, including Zoroastrians, Christians and Jews, and that Christian and Jewish leaders have even received funds from the Iranian government to repair their houses of worship. However, violations of religious freedom against those who follow the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, which is viewed as a heretical sect of Islam, and other unprotected groups continue to be of concern. Despite this, criticism by the United States of Iran's human rights violations often brings accusations of double standards because of the blind eye it casts toward its own allies, such as Saudi Arabia.

While the United States helped establish a special UN rapporteur on human rights in Iran, some participants felt it should do more to support human rights in Iran—such as including human rights issues in bilateral talks and supporting the trial of Iranian rights abusers at the International Criminal Court—and that this would help boost US credibility in the eyes of the Iranian people.

***Regional Dynamics and Iranian Influence***

Despite 30 years of frozen relations, sanctions, and a lack of military and economic development, Iran has grown in its regional influence. Participants discussed whether US policies in the Middle East have increased Iranian influence. It was thought by many that the US invasion of Iraq strengthened Iranian hardliners while decreasing the Iraqi threat to Iran. In addition, the Iraq war limited America's ability to shape desired outcomes in the region (e.g. the United States now has little ability to influence Syria, because it cannot afford financially or politically to intervene there). The influence of Israeli interests was also seen as negatively shaping US policy toward Iran, while perceived unconditional US support for Israel reduces America's ability to serve as an "honest broker" in the region.

US options are also constrained by the potential for other conflicts in the region that could be triggered by any belligerent US action toward Iran. For example, tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan have sharply increased, and Russia could take advantage of regional preoccupation with conflict with Iran to further its own conflict with Georgia. With the Arab Spring, Middle Eastern countries are also demonstrating greater independence from US concerns and priorities in the region. It was suggested that thought be given to the establishment of a collective security framework in the Middle East, in which the security of each depends on the security of all.

## **Options for US Action**

### ***Military Action***

Military action against Iran by either the United States or Israel will likely have a destabilizing effect on the region, particularly in the emerging post-revolutionary societies. It was thought that military action could actually strengthen the Iranian regime, as it would distract its citizens from domestic problems and provide cover for the government to crackdown on internal dissent and thwart the democratic aspirations of its citizens in the name of security. It would also lead Iranians to rally around the government as nationalism is reinforced in the face of external threat. A pre-emptive strike in particular would cast Iran as a victim of foreign aggression and possibly evoke no little sympathy and legitimacy from the international community.

Within the United States, new legislative initiatives on sanctions could lower the bar on what constitutes unacceptable behavior on the part of Iran, to the point of making a military confrontation more likely and constraining the US ability to deal with other issues or exchanges. On April 14, the United States and Iran will participate in international nuclear talks.<sup>iii</sup> If these talks prove unsuccessful, calls for war will likely increase. However, it seems highly unlikely that the United States will engage in yet another Middle East war during an election year.

### ***Sanctions***

Mixed views were expressed about the effectiveness of sanctions and whether they cause more harm to the targeted regime or to its people. Multilateral sanctions are characteristically far more effective than unilateral sanctions, and those that have been imposed by the United States, the European Union, and other members of the international community against Iran should be given adequate time to work. If the Iranian government cannot provide for its people (e.g. due to the effects of the sanctions on buying parts to repair planes, conducting international business, etc.), it will eventually be forced to change its stance on the nuclear issue.

Others have noted that nuclear development and black market trade continue in spite of the sanctions, and that sanctions can provide a convenient excuse for the government to tighten its grip on its population while blaming the West. If the goal of the sanctions is to hurt the regime, they are having some success; but if the goal is to change the behavior or policies of the regime, they are not. With the possible exception of South Africa, there is also little historical precedent to support the notion that sanctions lead to democratization.

The impact of Iranian sanctions on the international economy was also discussed. If Iranian oil is further restricted and no longer available to Asia, and if Saudi Arabia is unable to provide the resources to make up for the resulting reduction in supply, global prices could rise.

### ***Government Diplomacy***

The prolonged absence of both official and back-channel communications between the political leadership, military leadership, and intelligence agencies of the United States and Iran, has decreased US leverage to influence developments through diplomacy. Both countries have failed to capitalize on the occasional overtures of the other—including two offers by Iran to put “everything on the table” for discussion<sup>iv</sup> and the more recent overtures by President Obama in 2009<sup>v</sup>—to improve relations. In addition to the April 2012 nuclear talks, there has been some receptivity in the Iranian legislature to the idea of closed-door talks.

To the extent the Iranian government can portray the United States as a threat, it increases its own legitimacy as protector of its people and engenders support from increased feelings of nationalism. More than half of all

Iranians are under the age of 24,<sup>vi</sup> and removal of the United States as an enemy would force the government to address its domestic problems or face the potential of an Arab Spring-style uprising. US expressions of concern for free elections and the fair treatment of minorities, as well as increased overtures like the greetings extended by President Obama to the Iranian people on the Iranian New Year, were suggested as ways the United States could demonstrate greater support for the Iranian people and reduce any associated threat perceptions.

Effective engagement with Iran cannot focus solely on “moderates” or one particular group to the exclusion of others, any more than engagement with the United States could involve talking to either Democrats or Republicans without the other. Perceptions as to who is a moderate and who is a hardliner were also discussed, as was the likelihood that Pres. Ahmadinejad’s successor could well prove less moderate than he has been (some of the more expansive overtures on the nuclear question have emanated from him).

The importance of saving face as diplomacy is renewed after 30 years of frozen US-Iranian relations and mutual demonization was also discussed. The United States should consider what confidence-building measures can be implemented and carefully choose its language in advancing them in order to reduce fears by the Iranian leadership of a domestic backlash or a loss of face, if they begin to engage with the country they have long painted as their enemy. Members of Congress should also be careful not to make unpalatable demands that could sabotage diplomacy. The need to look at the relationship and the issues from the other’s point of view will be critical to any successful diplomatic efforts. Religion could offer a possible frame through which to open engagement, as Iranians are often skeptical of political discussions but tend to see religious engagement as more trustworthy and less threatening.

### ***Citizen Diplomacy***

Citizen diplomacy initiatives—such as people-to-people exchanges—were widely seen as desirable and likely necessary for improving relations. Engagement between Iranian and American citizens can play a key role in changing perceptions of hostility or enmity and creating greater space for the governments to engage with one another (under the cover of responding to the desires of their people).

It is generally felt that Iranians distinguish between their negative feelings about unpopular US government policies and their more positive feelings toward Americans more generally, a fact that could serve as a useful starting point for citizen engagement. Despite the myriad restrictions, those people-to-people exchanges which have occurred—such as the sporting event with American wrestlers in Iran some years back and visits to each country by delegations of American and Iranian religious and political leaders have been uniformly well-received by both populations.<sup>vii</sup>

The idea of legislators participating in similar exchanges was also thought to have merit. In fact, a US CODEL (Congressional delegation) to Iran was on the brink of approval by Iran when the “Axis of Evil” speech effectively derailed it. Not only would such visits open important channels of communications, but they would also enable legislators to get first-hand information, rather than relying on that which is filtered through interest groups or media.

\*The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) is a Washington-based NGO which addresses identity-based conflicts that escape the grasp of traditional diplomacy by incorporating religion as part of the solution. American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) is an informal group of Muslim community leaders and scholars that seeks to foster a constructive partnership between the American Muslim community and the US Government for the purpose of advancing the national interest. The views expressed in this brief may not necessarily represent the views of ICRD or AMCE.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafrica/640.php> Polling showed most Iranians favor persisting with enrichment. Asked whether they would favor an agreement whereby the current sanctions would be

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removed and Iran would continue its nuclear energy program but agree not to enrich uranium, only 31% favored this idea, while 55% opposed and 14% did not give an answer.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=News&id=740945182>

<sup>iii</sup> The April 14 talks did not result in a breakthrough, but they laid the foundation for future progress. Follow-up expert-level talks at the senior political level have been scheduled for May 23 in Baghdad.

<sup>iv</sup> “In 2003 the Iranian government sent a proposal to the White House, through the Swiss, offering to put everything on the table. Iran proposed broad concessions to the US, including a cessation of support for violent extremism, transparent inspections, and adoption of the Arab peace initiative. But President George W. Bush, at the height of Middle East grandstanding, also dismissed it outright. More letters came, but were promptly rejected. And, like the Obama administration, Bush pursued direct talks with North Korea but not Iran.” <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/2eb1995e-824a-11e1-b06d-00144feab49a.html#ixzz1syHwu6s>

<sup>v</sup> <http://worldfocus.org/blog/2009/03/20/obama-makes-overture-to-iranian-people-in-video-message/4541/>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://iran.unfpa.org/Country%20Profile.asp>

<sup>vii</sup> “U.S. Wrestling Team Arrives In Iran,” <http://www.payvand.com/news/10/jul/1252.html>.

“Visit of Iranian Religious Leaders and Scholars to the U.S.,” <http://icrd.org/rp28>.

“Visit to Iran, <http://icrd.org/rp17>.”