

COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

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Summary: A Symposium on Iran's Nuclear Program

On April 5, 2006, the Council on Foreign Relations held a half-day, on-the-record conference on Iran's nuclear program, convening leading experts on nonproliferation, technology, Middle East policy, international relations, and public policy to analyze this complex and potentially dangerous issue. "How this plays out will have enormous consequences, not simply for Iraq, not simply for the region, but for questions about proliferation, for questions about energy, for the U.S. economy....Indeed, it's difficult to think of a significant international issue which will ultimately not be affected one way or another by how this issue is ultimately resolved," said Council on Foreign Relations President **Richard N. Haass**.

Attention to Iran's nuclear program is increasingly urgent. Since the beginning of 2006, Iran has resumed uranium enrichment in its Natanz nuclear facility and continued work on a new generation of ballistic missile delivery systems. On March 29, the UN Security Council issued a unanimous, nonbinding statement requesting that Iran halt its uranium enrichment program within a thirty day period. U.S. and European officials have recently discussed forming a coalition that would impose economic sanctions against Iran if it does not comply with the UN statement. Yet as Iran experiments further with enriched uranium, the consequences of drawn-out diplomacy become increasingly dangerous.

The symposium's three sessions covered the current standing of Iran's nuclear production and development, the motivation and strategies for its nuclear program, and sustainable policy options for the United States. Highlights of the panels included:

- Experts agreed that the precise stage of Iran's nuclear development is unknown. It is certain, however, that Iran has uranium enrichment capabilities, which is the vital technology needed for the production of nuclear weapons.
- Iran's claim that the development of its nuclear power is solely for a civilian energy program was widely dismissed.
- Experts agreed that the lack of direct dialogue between the United States and Iran and the lack of public dialogue within Iran needs to be remedied.
- Several participants argued that, contrary to recent assertions in the news media, Iran's nuclear program is not a central concern of the majority of the Iranian people for whom employment, political freedom, and social issues take precedence.
- There was widespread agreement that talk of a limited, preventive strike against Iran's nuclear targets is "deceptive," as American Enterprise Institute's **Reuel Marc Gerecht** put it in the third session. Such an action would most certainly result in Iranian retaliation followed by military escalation of unknown

dimensions and possible follow up attacks for years to come to prevent reconstitution of an Iranian nuclear capacity.

Among the recommendations put forward:

- The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) should further investigate the potential weaponization of Iran's nuclear program;
- Several participants emphasized the need for both U.S.-Iran and international dialogues on the nuclear issues. Others pointed to the need for internal debate within Iran, stating that there is little or no public discussion of the country's nuclear program (and the political, economic, and physical price Iran could pay as a result) in the Iranian media or other public forums;
- Multiple experts suggested the use of diplomacy (that is, political, strategic, or economic incentives coupled with a range of sanctions to contain Iran's nuclear program). Gerecht argued that diplomacy is unlikely to be feasible and military intervention is likely to be the only tool that will stop Iran's nuclear program.

SESSION ONE

Iran's Nuclear Development and Production: A Status Report

The symposium's first session brought together **Charles D. Ferguson II**, Council fellow for science and technology; **Mark Fitzpatrick**, senior fellow for nonproliferation at the International Institute for Strategic Studies; **Daniel Poneman**, senior fellow at the Forum for International Policy; and **Carla Robbins**, chief diplomatic correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*, as president.

The discussion focused on the technical aspects of Iran's nuclear development and the potential timelines for its complete development of nuclear weapons.

Working under the premise that there are several unknowns in terms of the nuclear capabilities Iran possesses and plans to develop, the panel began by discussing two central questions: What type of nuclear capabilities do we think the Iranians have, and how long will it be before Iran has nuclear weapons?

Robbins explained that there are two options in building a nuclear reactor: enriched uranium or plutonium. Iran currently claims that it is producing low enriched uranium to produce nuclear fuel. "The problem with nuclear technology is that the same thing that can make the fuel can also make the core of the nuclear weapon," said Robbins. How far along Iran is in enriching uranium is information we lack. "It really does matter. It matters because it gives us a sense of how long diplomacy can go on," argued Robbins.

Fitzpatrick described the important technical timeline of how long it will take for Iran to produce the highly enriched uranium needed to build a nuclear weapon. It is important to keep these timelines in mind, he said, because the European diplomatic strategy so far has relied on "buying time." "As long as Iran can't enrich uranium, they can't build a bomb.

But when they get to the point that they've mastered the technology, all bets are off," he said. Iran is now moving more quickly toward enriching uranium. The time required may be a few months from now or less, according to Fitzpatrick.

Fitzgerald stressed the limitations of analyzing the situation from a purely technological standpoint. "How you change Iran's goal of mastering [nuclear technology] for weapons purposes" is an important question, he said. He noted several signs of military involvement in Iran's nuclear program, including the Gchine mine, which has been IAEA investigated for being under the management of the Iranian military.

Ferguson cautioned that Iran may be running their nuclear program on "parallel tracks," one overt, another clandestine. He gave the example of the uranium conversion facility at Isfahan, where processed uranium ore ("yellow cake") is converted into uranium tetrafluoride (UF₄, also known as "green salt"). There is fear in the West, he said, that Iran may have a hidden, military-controlled program to do the same conversion (whose code name is "The Green Salt Project"). The IAEA is currently investigating whether this is taking place.

Poneman speculated that the Iranians might be trying to convince the international community that they need to simply get used to Iran's nuclear development program, as in the case of North Korea. This may be Iran's way of telling those who are trying to completely halt their nuclear development that it is too late to do so.

Iran will need a period of three years to have enough highly enriched uranium to build an atom bomb whether it is built at Natanz or a clandestine facility. The panel agreed that both timelines—the technical and the political—need to be kept in perspective. "My sense is that Iran is pressing ahead on the political front as quickly as the track will bear," Poneman said.

Why not just give Iran a pilot nuclear enrichment plant that could only produce a modest amount of enriched uranium? Fitzpatrick said that it would be "hard to have any assurance" that Iran would not replicate its nuclear development outside of the pilot plant. Having the capability to enrich uranium opens up a range of possibilities and potential dangers, he added.

Both Ferguson and Fitzgerald agreed that Iran's nuclear development cannot be rolled back. Ferguson argued that a pilot plant should be given to the Iranians, but with the caveat that they agree to "hyper-intrusive" inspections all over the country. What type of uranium is being enriched in their plants could and should be monitored. He added that Iran should be used as a test bed for such proliferation-resistant technologies.

Poneman argued otherwise. "There is always time to capitulate later," he said. A pilot facility would be intrinsically dangerous. Moreover, Iran does not have a "right" to technology other than for peaceful purposes, as stated by the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. The country's longstanding clandestine weapons program, its dogged pursuit of

uranium enrichment and recent development of a heavy water reactor are reasons why Iran should not be able to enrich, he said.

The critical point, said Fitzgerald, is not arguing the issue of Iran's right to nuclear technology. Thirty-five countries currently have nuclear power plants that create much more nuclear energy than Iran. A third of them, he noted, have enrichment and the other two-thirds have forgone it. In terms of Iran, he said, the emphasis should be on what it needs to do to regain the trust of the international community as its nuclear program moves forward, leaving the issue of access privileges aside. Foregoing uranium enrichment is an essential step if Iran is to win that trust, he added.

SESSION TWO

Iran's Motives and Strategy

What are the internal dynamics driving Iran's pursuit of nuclear power? The second session focused on that question by addressing the political, social, and historical forces behind Iran's nuclear program. Panelists included: **Patrick Clawson**, deputy director for research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy; **Karim Sadjadpour**, Iran analyst for the International Crisis Group (participating via videoconference from Washington, DC); **Mahmood Sariolghalam**, professor of international relations, School of Economic and Political Science at the National University of Iran; and **Deborah Amos**, Iraq correspondent for National Public Radio, presiding.

Amos began by asking whether Iran wants the atom bomb, and if so, why. Clawson responded by saying that Iran wants a more powerful, influential role in the region. The high price of oil coupled with the United States' entanglements in Iraq has made Iran feel strong—and it sees nuclear weapons as a powerful indicator of its move toward modernity. “There is a very strong feeling among many Iranians that their country should be a powerful and modern country, and that powerful and modern countries have powerful and modern weapons,” he said.

Sariolghalam concurred, pointing to a widespread “imperial mindset” among Iranians. “There is an inclination for any political leadership [in Iran] of any political orientation to pursue power relations at the national and the regional level,” he said.

Another problem, Sariolghalam suggested, is that while Iran still has a revolutionary government, Iranian society is not revolutionary. “If I were to make a comparison,” he said, “we are at the Brezhnev era of the Iranian revolution.” The power of the state is military and defensive, with an emphasis on maintaining the status quo political order and a deemphasis on economic development. There is a conceptual and intellectual discrepancy, he argued, between the priorities of the state and those of the general population.

How does this discrepancy play out in terms of Iran's nuclear program? Sadjadpour argued that Iran's vast young population (75 percent are under the age of thirty) is still

emerging from the depression of the Iran-Iraq War. “People don’t romanticize the prospects of conflict, of militarization,” he said. “While some people may feel nationalistic, I’ve encountered just as many people who are concerned about [the nuclear project] or ambivalent.” Moreover, the nuclear project is highly technical, and hardly a priority for the majority of the population or even for the elite, he argued. Still, the prevalent perception among Tehran’s elite is that Iran should not succumb to Western pressure to halt its nuclear development efforts.

Sariolghalam sees a “psychological collective interest” on the part of the general Iranian population for their country to become powerful. While the majority may not grasp the technological or political details of the nuclear program, Iran’s nuclear capabilities have become an issue of national pride for many Iranians. The Iranian media also perpetuates this idea. “If Iran becomes nuclear,” he said, pointing to a common refrain in the Iranian media, “Iran will be a member of a very exclusive club at the international level.”

Clawson said a disturbing factor in this complicated equation of national and political interests is Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. “[He] seems to feel that conflict with the West, at the very least, is nothing particularly to worry about and may indeed be a good thing.” Clawson suggested Ahmadinejad views such conflict as a way to reinvigorate revolutionary fervor and realizes that nationalism could replace Islam as a collective rallying point for the population.

Ahmadinejad’s emphasis on manipulating the nuclear issue in this way goes against the interests of many Iranian elites as well as the general population, whose main concern is the country’s economic development. If Iran’s nuclear program is met with economic sanctions, both the West and the Ahmadinejad government would be held accountable by the Iranian population, said Clawson.

The grave danger at the moment, said Sadjadpour, is the complete absence of direct dialogue between Iran and the United States. “Each side doesn’t necessarily know what the other side’s red lines are,” he said. “This leads to the danger of escalating. I think this is a concern we should all be aware of right now.”

Iran’s current policy is not to provoke the United States, said Sariolghalam, but Iran views consistent low-scale contained, nonmilitary confrontation with the West as necessary. Iran’s policy in the Middle East and its nuclear program is a conscious policy choice: a degree of conflict with the United States provides “the political incentive for the top elites to maintain the security apparatus...the security of the state,” said Sariolghalam. The maintenance of such conflict is the *raison d’être* of their system, he added.

Clawson accepted this analysis and added that involving the Europeans and the Russians in negotiating Iran’s nuclear program will temper the chances of confrontation between Iran and United States. The more the issue is framed and negotiated as international, rather than simply one of concern to United States, the more effective and more likely compromise will be. A common perception in Iran, added Sariolghalam, is that the U.S.

concern over the nuclear program is a foil for even greater demands, culminating with regime change.

Because the relationship between the United States and Iran is so strained and infused with mistrust, successfully negotiating Iran's nuclear policy must be an international effort, said Clawson. The nuclear issue is so urgent and so pressing that it would be in our interest to resolve it. The panelists generally agreed that other issues—such as Iran's human rights record, terrorism, and its political leadership—will be very difficult to influence. Yet such a deal can be reached on the nuclear matter and it is imperative to do so expediently.

SESSION THREE

Policy Options for the United States

How can the United States and the international community best tackle the policy challenges ahead? What are the pros and cons of various policy options? The symposium's final session identified and analyzed alternatives. Panelists included **Reuel Marc Gerecht**, resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research; **Kenneth Pollack**, director of research at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution; and **Richard Haass** presiding.

Haass began by defining five policy objectives for the United States with regard to Iran: a reconsideration by Tehran of its nuclear policy; the cessation of terrorist activities; full or limited support for U.S. policy in Iraq and Afghanistan; a changed policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and an improved record on democracy and human rights. The panel's discussion focused on which of these issues should be prioritized and drive U.S. policy and what form policy should ultimately take.

Speaking first, Gerecht asserted that, for the United States and the EU-3 (Britain, France, and Germany), the nuclear issue—specifically the need for Iran to cease uranium enrichment—comes first. Iran's policy toward Israel is also an important consideration. "We are about ready to see whether the Iranians are going to meet their own rhetoric," he said, with regard to pledges Tehran has made to Hamas to replace suspended Western financial aid. But Gerecht dismissed the larger importance of such a move when compared to Iran's nuclear ambitions. The looming question is whether Iran's nuclear potential will eventually provoke "preventive military strikes" on the country. The central underlying issue, argued Gerecht, is regime change. A different regime in Iran, he said, is the only way to quickly transform the country's security and social policies.

Pollack agreed that Iran's nuclear policy is the top priority, but argued forcefully that it cannot be separated from Iran's problematic domestic, foreign, and social policies. A central concern is that once Iran acquires nuclear weapons, the issues of democracy building, human rights, and its Middle East policy will become far more fraught with difficulty. The "fundamental problem" with Iran's nuclear program, however, is its

potential use for terrorist activities. Terrorism is “absolutely intertwined with the issue of the nuclear program,” he said.

Spurring the debate, Haass outlined four options for dealing with Iran: a diplomatic initiative involving political and/or economic sanctions, a preventive military strike, regime change, and a “default option” of deterrence. Is there any reason not to choose the diplomatic option, and, if so, what option or package of options would the panelists favor?

Gerecht discounted diplomacy as truly feasible, arguing that a military threat that seems credible is the only certain way to bring the Iranians to the negotiating table. Pollack disagreed with this premise and reiterated the argument that nuclear weapons are not a top priority for most Iranians. “This regime is very concerned about its economy,” he said. “The Iranian people have higher priorities than nuclear weapons. Their highest priorities are jobs, their livelihood, political freedom, social issues.” Iran’s economic concerns and its need for foreign investment therefore point to the potential success of investment sanctions as an effective diplomatic strategy, said Pollack.

Working with the premise that Iran will eventually have nuclear weapons, Pollack favors a containment policy. Differentiating the situation from Sadaam Hussein’s Iraq, Pollack stated that Iran could be prevented from both using and transferring their nuclear weapons.

Both panelists agreed that limited military attacks or a preventive strike on Iran should not be characterized as quick fixes. Any military action against Iran, Gerecht said, is going to find the United States at war with Iran, even if the United States does not invade. And even if the United States limits its bombing to Iran’s nuclear facilities, retaliation is a certainty, said Pollack.

Reiterating a theme running throughout the symposium, both Gerecht and Pollack stressed the need for American diplomatic engagement as an important step toward creating a sustainable policy with Iran. “Regimes tend to be much more likely to change...in a context often where there are forms of American diplomatic engagement rather than attempts at diplomatic isolation,” said Pollack.

Approximately 150 people attended the symposium, which was webcast on [cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org).

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Transcripts, audio files, and video of the symposium are posted on www.cfr.org.

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