



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Iran: The Year of Reckoning”

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
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The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars hosted an event to explore the last year of Iranian politics and U.S. diplomacy toward the Iranian regime. There were two panels of experts, each highlighting a different component of either geopolitics or internal Iranian social forces. The first, moderated by professor **Shaul Bakhash** of George Mason University, included: **Michael Postl**, former Ambassador of the Austrian Republic to Iran; and **Nicholas Burns**, former Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs and current professor at Harvard. The second panel, moderated by professor **Kaveh Ehsani** from DePaul University, included: **Farideh Farhi**, independent scholar and affiliate graduate faculty at the University of Hawaii at Manoa; and **Suzanne Malone**, senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy.

Michael Postl opened by briefly recounting the months leading up to and following Iran’s June 2009 president election. Voter turnout was remarkably high, he said, and there was an increase of 300 percent in the number of Iranians abroad who participated. As an Austrian diplomat stationed in Tehran, Postl remembered the tension and division within the administration following the disputed electoral results.

He then shifted to the role of the EU, which was represented by 22 embassies in Tehran out of 27 member states. In the weeks following the election, the EU had daily crisis meetings and called on Iran to investigate the results, allow unrestricted access to journalists, cease violent crackdowns on peaceful demonstrations, and guarantee the right of assembly. “We got a lot of information from twitter and also foreign embassies who had diplomats out on the street,” he recalled. **“But we were also intimidated and asked by the Iranians formally to not go out and report, that this was an internal situation and there should be any interference by foreigners.”**

The EU also held four rounds of dialogue, with a particular focus on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Since 2004, Postl said, the EU has worked for a diplomatic solution to Iran’s nuclear program. But in order to understand Iranian foreign policy, “one has to understand Iran’s domestic political situation.”

Next, **Nicholas Burns** addressed the difficulty in developing a coherent strategy toward Iran and presented some options to consider. Iran poses a number of significant challenges, he said, pointing to the regime’s prominent history of supporting terrorism, oppressing its own people, and developing a nuclear capacity that would hold severe consequences for the Arab world, Israel, Asia, Europe, and the U.S. Even though there’s a general consensus in the international community that Iran should not become a nuclear power, and although for many year’s the West has had a “well-intentioned” policy to negotiate with Iran, Burns observed that “we’ve always been rebuffed by the Iranian government.”

The biggest problem, he said, is that “we have insufficient international unity toward Iran, whether it’s sanctions or coherent expectations of negotiations.” Reflecting upon the recent trilateral nuclear fuel deal brokered by Turkey and Brazil, Burns called it a “most unfortunate” agreement that will detract from ongoing U.S. efforts in a number of areas. “It’s a lifeline to Ahmadinejad on the eve of sanctions,” he said, noting that although he agrees with **President Obama’s** policy, the Turkey-Brazil episode is another indication that Obama hasn’t had the necessary support from the rest of the world.

Burns then presented six options for policy-makers:

1. **Strengthen our international coalition:** There should be real consequences when Iran defies the UN and other international agreements, he said, and it takes a unified coalition to enforce previous and future agreements.
2. **Push ahead with UN Sanctions:** Although he conceded that they are not a “panacea,” Burns thinks they are an important component within the context of a larger strategy. “It means Iran is being branded as an outlaw state, which will put a spotlight on it.”
3. **Stronger support negotiations with Iran:** Burns noted that this may seem a little contradictory in light of his previous recommendation, but he referred to the history of U.S.-Iranian relations to observe that there has never been any period of sustained dialogue. “We owe it to ourselves to sit down with the Iranian leadership ... we ought to exhaust diplomatic means.”
4. **Prepare our friends in the Middle East for the possibility that Iran might become one of strongest military powers in the region:** This includes aid for security.
5. **As part of our public diplomacy, don’t exclude any options:** “We should say clearly that we are not taking the military option off the table,” he said, noting that the integration of force in diplomacy is a time-honored convention. “Strength, particularly in the Middle East, is a necessary precondition to peace.”
6. **Support – openly and clearly – the millions of Iranians who want a greater measure of freedom.**

“We are a lot stronger than Iran, and we are superior in our value of governance,” Burns said. “Patient, forceful, smart policy designed to outlast the Iranian government is the right way to go forward. That’s why it’s so important we keep the lines open for negotiation.”

Shaul Bakhsh then raised the question about whether the current regime is capable of self-correction. “The experience over the last decade or more might tell us something essential about the character of the regime,” he said. Bakhsh then asked Postl if he thinks the post-election protests created the possibility for internal reform. Postl replied that there is certainly a strong division between Iranian society and the regime, but the militarization of society after the election, and the ever-present paranoia of the U.S. fomenting an Iranian “Velvet Revolution” may preclude reform in the short-term.

Next, Bakhsh asked Burns if his prescription simply rehashes old strategies that failed, to which Burns noted a lesson from **George Mitchell**; you might fail for hundreds of days, but you only need to succeed on one. “Patience is the right policy,” he said. “Avoid the extremes ... patience, sanction them, surround them with military pressure, tighten the economic noose, but offer to negotiate and keep that line open.”

One attendee asked about the best way to craft sanctions. Postl reported that the EU wants the bulk of sanctions to be passed by the UN, but Burns disagreed and said that UN sanctions would not be sufficient.

After a short break, **Farideh Farhi** opened the second panel with a presentation on conservatives in Iran. **“Conflicts among conservatives will affect the direction Iran will take in the next few years,” she said, “and it is paramount to give attention to the conversations that are taking place about the future of the country – existential, institutional, and political.”** The conservative movement in Iran is divided between idealists and realists. The former embodies a paranoid style of politics that will stay intransigent till the end, while the latter accept the reality of social and economic changes since the revolution and are trying to figure out how to gradually adjust to a new environment.

“While the events last year suggest the system has been able to temporarily quell post-election angst,” she said, “the reality is that all the problems, divisions, and bi-polarity of Iran continue to be reproduced within the system and conservative ranks.” Although individual reformers have been purged from the system for now, “the Green Movement will remain part of the conversation.”

Next, **Suzanne Maloney** discussed Iran’s economy, which she believes is “deeply relevant” to formulation of international policy vis-à-vis Iran’s nuclear program as well as its human rights deficiencies. She noted that although Obama came into office with a dual track diplomatic strategy, last year’s elections appeared to disrupt that approach. And despite cautious optimism about prospective sanctions, **“it’s almost impossible to find anyone here who tells you that they think sanctions are likely to succeed in reversing Iran’s nuclear calculus.”** Not only were previous rounds of sanctions weaker than originally intended, but Maloney noted that the Iranian Islamic regime has demonstrated throughout its 30 year history that in periods of severe economic crisis, it has been more dangerous and dramatic.

Maloney went on to say that there’s very little historic precedent for sanctions empowering opposition groups to affect internal political change. **“Sanctions do not in most cases provide what the opposition seems to be lacking, which is a coherent strategy and leadership that is necessary to take on the regime.”** Further, she contended that the economy has never been the reformists’ strong suit. Much of the labor force is somewhat reliant upon public enterprises, and there’s also a question about whether those who have resources and assets are willing to put that money behind an opposition movement. However, she did note that internal economic debates helped facilitate the formation of an opposition and reform movement.

After these the second panel’s presentation, **Kaveh Ehsani** reminded the audience that part of the current recalcitrance stems from the early 2000s, when then-**President Khatami** “extended a hand” without a response from the U.S. He also noted that many people associated with the opposition are also part of the regime, and they are largely playing within the rules of the regime. **“Society is looking for a gradual, least-costly path to change the system,”** he said, going on to urge policymakers to think more seriously about Iran’s internal social movements when developing a strategy for engagement.

When asked about the Iranian regime’s goals, Farhi answered that **“Iran wants to be a regional power that has influence economically. There’s quite a bit of consensus that Iran doesn’t want to be contained and does not like sanctions. But the question about how to go about deflecting the aggressive approach toward Iran is something that is constantly debated.”**

In response to a question about the Guardian Council consolidating power and manipulating elections, Farhi said that it's a debate about the instruments of power, and she also noted that some conservatives have expressed serious reservations about the decision after the election to go toward a securitized state. Ehsani added that the fact that Iran doesn't allow institutionalized parties means that individuals can be very fluid in the positions they adopt. "The so-called radicals of the 1980s are now the liberal, state reformers, political liberals of the 2000s ... What remains constant is a style of debate and discourse. Those debates are resilient, but it's different actors that fill them."