



DIALOGUE SESSION ONE

Assessing Progress with Iran

Moderator: Kenneth M. Pollack, Director, Saban Center at
Brookings

James Steinberg, Deputy Secretary of State, U.S.
Department of State

Dan Meridor, Deputy Prime Minister

Uzi Arad, National Security Advisor to Prime Minister
Netanyahu

Senator Joseph Lieberman (I-Connecticut), Chairman,
Senate Homeland Security Committee



The Saban Forum's first dialogue session on Monday, November 16 was devoted to discussing the long-standing challenges posed by Iran—specifically, its pursuit of nuclear capabilities—as well as new factors, such as the Iranian protest movement, that add complexity to the issue. While there was widespread agreement among Israelis and Americans on the need to employ sanctions to press Iran to halt its nuclear program, there was disagreement over whether each side would be willing to accept a policy of containment should Iran gain nuclear capabilities, and if not, whether each side would be willing to accept the price that would come with employing military options.

One American participant began by saying that many of the challenges the United States and Israel face in the Middle East are directly influenced by the Iranian regime and its nuclear program. The American participant outlined the Obama administration's policy toward Iran, saying that the United States' key objective is to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons. To do so, the Obama administration feels it is important to engage with Tehran because Washington's past unwillingness to engage has not resulted in halting Iran's nuclear program. In addition, should legitimate attempts at engagement fail, the United States' hand within the international community would be strengthened and Washington would be in a better position to pursue alternative means.

The participant continued by saying that the United States' approach has been multi-faceted, and has consisted of two main phases. The first phase has entailed employing a policy of dialogue with the Iranians and at the same time strengthening the coalition within the international community. Because the good will that President Obama extended toward Iran has been met with a



clenched fist, the administration has shifted to the second phase, which entails imposing sanctions while still continuing to engage.

Many American and Israeli participants supported sanctions, and argued they are an effective tool in pressuring the regime. An American asserted that the only thing more important to the Iranian regime than a nuclear program is its survival; if the regime's survival is threatened, then it will begin to make concessions on the country's nuclear program. The participant cited Iran's oil program as a point of weakness—because Iran imports most of its refined oil and then sells it at a greatly subsidized price to its citizens, whenever the price of oil increases even marginally, the Iranian public voices its discontent through protests. Therefore, the participant suggested, imposing sanctions on oil would cause unrest and pressure on the government. Most importantly, an American argued, sanctions would send the message that there are consequences when agreements are not met and the nuclear program continues.

However, other participants doubted the effectiveness of sanctions and cited the poor track record that sanctions have had in influencing the regime. One participant pointed to the fact that Iran has strong ties to Russia, China, and India. Therefore, Washington may find it difficult to achieve a comprehensive sanctions regime if these countries do not support the policy, and historically they have been loathe to do so. Some participants argued that even if sanctions were enacted with international support, it is doubtful that the Iranian government would make concessions on its nuclear program.

Furthermore, some participants argued that sanctions may motivate the Iranian people to react in favor of the regime, particularly if the sanctions enact a heavy toll on the Iranian public. To prevent this, and to achieve other policy gains, an American participant suggested that the United States base the sanctions on human rights violations. Doing so would let the Iranian people know that the United States is on their side. In addition, this strategy would signal to the Iranian regime that their actions are not acceptable by the standards of the international community.

Though participants agreed on the importance of the Green Movement within Iran, there was disagreement over whether it is possible to link the administration's non-proliferation goal with a program of support of the popular opposition. An American participant felt that the United States should make it clear that it is on the side of the people of Iran, and should look into creating or disseminating technologies that would prevent



the regime from blocking Iranian access to electronic communications. However, other American participants voiced their concerns over having the United States show its support for the Iranian public, arguing that this could weaken the legitimacy of the movement.

While there was broad agreement that the Iranian nuclear program needs to be halted, there were several disagreements over particulars. For instance, the point was made that while Israel would be more threatened by an Iranian nuclear weapon than the United States, the United States would be more threatened by an Iranian response to a military strike—U.S. objectives in Afghanistan and Iraq are intensely vulnerable to Iranian retaliation.

A critical question voiced by an Israeli participant was, at what point would Israel's interests diverge from those of the United States? Specifically, could Israel live with an Iranian nuclear program if there were assurances that no nuclear weapons would be built? An Israeli participant said that Israel's position vis-à-vis Iran would be dependent on whether the regime truly stopped its weapons and enrichment programs. The participant suggested that Israel would end any effort to undermine the regime only if the Iranian government agreed to a comprehensive stop to its nuclear program.

An Israeli participant concluded the discussion by saying that one of the greatest challenges both Israel and the United States share is in terms of their respective populations. While the leaders and elites in each country understand the threat posed by Iran, the American and Israeli publics do not share the sense of urgency. Public opinion must therefore be mobilized to gain momentum for any strong policy toward Iran.