



The Islamic Republic of Iran: Multidisciplinary
Analyses of its Theocracy, Nationalism, and
Assertion of Power

Department of History

11-8-2009

Negotiations, Sanctions, and Iranian Politics

Patrick Clawson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.case.edu/spme-2009>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Clawson, P. (2009). Negotiations, Sanctions, and Iranian Politics. Scholars For Peace In The Middle East Conference 2009.

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at Scholarly Commons @ Case Western Reserve University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Islamic Republic of Iran: Multidisciplinary Analyses of its Theocracy, Nationalism, and Assertion of Power by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Case Western Reserve University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@case.edu.

CWRU authors have made this work freely available. [Please tell us](#) how this access has benefited or impacted you!

Negotiations, Sanctions, and Iranian Politics

By Patrick Clawson

On an issue as complex as that of the Iranian nuclear program, analysts have an obligation to firmly uphold the importance of first principles, not just the latest twists and turns which so dominate the news and can distract policymakers. Three such principles are: by what yardsticks can diplomacy's progress be judged? what would constitute success for sanctions? and what are the key concerns of the Iranian side in the negotiations?

Criteria by Which to Evaluate Whether Diplomacy is Making Progress

The long-range goals of the United States and its allies with respect to Iran's nuclear program, as well as how to induce Iran to agree to these objectives, have been a matter of significant dispute. Nonetheless, it is useful to consider what would constitute benchmarks for progress. Three issues stand in the forefront: resetting Iran's nuclear clock, creating transparency through verification, and resolving the fundamental issues between Iran and the international community.

Resetting the Nuclear Clock. So long as Iran continues to race ahead with its nuclear program, negotiations risk being overtaken by events: the window for talks depends on Iran's inability to manufacture a nuclear weapon. For this reason, the focus has been on convincing Iran to suspend its nuclear enrichment so that it cannot produce enough low-enriched uranium (LEU) to use as feedstock for the highly enriched uranium necessary for a nuclear bomb.

The October 2009 Geneva agreement between Iran and the P5+1 (the five UN Security Council permanent members plus Germany, the group which has been negotiating with Iran about the nuclear issue), however, resulted in a different means of reducing the risk of an Iranian "breakout." Rather than reducing the amount of LEU Iran produces, the new approach focuses on reducing the amount of LEU Iran has on its soil. Iran agreed to ship 80 percent of its current LEU stock -- 1,200 kilograms -- to Russia, which would leave Tehran with too little LEU from its declared facilities to make a bomb. If the deal goes ahead, various government estimates suggest that Iran will need eighteen months to produce enough LEU to return to its current level of 1,200 kilograms. For this reason, the P5+1 told Iran -- in no uncertain terms -- that prompt shipment of the full 1,200 kilograms to Russia is essential.

Since the Geneva meeting, however, Iran -- not surprisingly -- has stalled, in effect walking away from the deal though not openly killing it. In an attempt to rewrite the terms to its advantage, Iranian leaders reportedly offered instead to ship 100 kilograms per month -- an amount equal to what Iran's enrichment program produces, such that they would leave the regime with a stockpile sufficient for producing a bomb. Such efforts to rework an already negotiated agreement are all too typical of past business deals negotiated by the Islamic Republic, which in many cases have stalled for years before finally falling through completely.

Transparency and Verification. No deal is worthwhile if Iran cheats in a way that reduces the effectiveness of the agreement. The standards for Iran's compliance must be based on past performance: Tehran's two-decade history of lying, concealing, and refusing to live up to its

treaty obligations demands extreme vigilance. Clever, lawyerly rationales for actions that undercut the deal are not acceptable. The essential requirement is that Iran become transparent.

A key indicator will be whether Iran follows through on offers it has made. Foreign Minister Manoucher Motaki stated in New York in October 2009 that Iran has no undeclared nuclear facilities under construction. As explained in the February 2010 International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report about Iran, Iran put that pledge into writing in its December 2, 2009 letter to the IAEA, stating, “The Islamic Republic of Iran will inform the Agency, as it has been done [sic] before, on the existence of any other nuclear facility in Iran in accordance to the Safeguards Agreement with the Agency.” Then Iranian officials announced that they plan to build ten more enrichment facilities and that they had selected the sites for five of them. The IAEA promptly wrote Iran requesting “further information regarding the design and scheduling of the construction of such facilities.” In its response, Iran reverted to its past – incorrect – position that it is under no obligation to provide such information until an advanced state of construction and implied that it had no intention of doing so.

On a similar note, President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad told the *Washington Post* in September 2009 that Iran would make its nuclear scientists available to the IAEA -- which in the past, Tehran has repeatedly refused to do. The February 2010 IAEA report makes clear Iran did nothing of the sort. Indeed, that report lays out in much greater detail than before the questions the IAEA would like Iran to answer. In particular, the report’s section on “possible military dimensions” refers to many issues including “high precision detonators fired simultaneously,” “whether Iran developed a spherical implosion system, possibly with the assistance of a foreign expert” widely rumored to be Russian, and “whether the engineering design and computer modeling studies aimed at producing a new design for the payload chamber of the missile were for a nuclear payload.” Iran has not provided the requested information about any of these matters.

Resolving Underlying Differences. The Geneva agreement was limited to resetting the nuclear clock and addressing verification concerns; no progress was made on resolving the underlying differences between Iran and the international community. Iran continues to insist it will plow ahead with its enrichment and missile programs. Although the P5+1 did not emphasize its long-term objective, diplomats from each country clarified that Iran must act in accordance with the Security Council resolutions calling for Iran to suspend its nuclear and missile programs until it has restored the international community's confidence in its purely peaceful intentions.

Some have suggested that existing Security Council resolutions are unrealistic and that any agreement must allow Iran to have limited enrichment. Perhaps so. But the international community as a whole -- not the dictates of one or a few powers -- must decide on this matter. So long as the UN resolutions remain intact, international diplomacy should aim at achieving compliance with those orders. Premature capitulation would be particularly unwise, as it would indicate a willingness to accept less than what the Security Council has ordered at a time when Iran has shown no willingness to change its position.

Determining the Effectiveness of Sanctions on Iran

Until now, much of the analysis about sanctions on Iran has focused on specific measures, such as sanctions on refined gas, insurance, reinsurance, and additional Iranian banks. The most basic issues, however -- the purpose and goal of sanctions and the priorities of the Iranian leadership -- are often lost sight of in such debate. For the United States and its allies, the key to success will be to articulate these fundamental issues and then use guiding principles to determine subsequent action.

What Are Sanctions Meant to Achieve? The primary aim of the sanctions under consideration is to force Iran's hand on the nuclear impasse, although they may have other effects, such as supporting creative diplomacy, slowing down Iran's nuclear program, and stopping Iran's support of terrorism. The gravity and efficacy of any sanction should not be measured by how damaging it is to Iran, but instead in what prospects it offers for inducing Iran's leaders to change course on the nuclear program or to achieve parallel objectives. While crippling the Iranian economy is not in itself a goal, it may become the only means possible to change Iran's nuclear direction.

The months since the June 2009 presidential elections have shown that Iran's hardliners have a higher priority -- staying in power -- than the welfare of the Iranian people, and they may not be affected at all by sanctions that impose great costs on ordinary Iranians. Only sanctions that threaten the leadership's hold on power will likely lead to a fundamental change in their uncompromising position on the nuclear program. Such sanctions may offer better prospects for affecting their strategic calculus than do simple economic measures that offer opportunities for those in power, such as the Revolutionary Guard, to profit from sanctions busting. To be sure, other objectives, such as slowing Iran's nuclear program, may well argue for taking a variety of other steps at the same time.

Demonstrating that Hardline Policies Do Not Work. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad has justified his foreign policy by saying that his strategy has been successful while Iran's previous policies of accommodation toward the West have failed. In his June 4 televised debate with Mir Hossein Mousavi, Ahmadinezhad said that Muhammad Khatami's detente policy "led to the shutdown of our nuclear facilities and imposition of two protocols [UN Security Council resolutions imposing sanctions] on the Iranian nation ... and seven resolutions were adopted in the governors board of the IAEA." He then continued: "In the course of twenty-seven years in which you, Rafsanjani, and Khatami have run the country, the United States used a regime change policy, but now America officially announces that it does not have regime change policy for Iran." His point was that his foreign policy had less cost and more benefits than Iran's previous policies.

In the same debate, Mousavi said that the current policies "damage the dignity of Iran, tarnish its reputation, and cause lots of tension with other countries." He argued that the consequences of Ahmadinezhad's defiant foreign policies would be grave and devastating for Iran.

The United States has an interest in proving Mousavi correct -- and Ahmadinezhad wrong -- by demonstrating that defiant policies have a price and that accommodating policies bring benefits. This idea is particularly important in the aftermath of the June 12 election. The United States wants to engage Iran and at the same time avoid legitimizing Ahmadinezhad. One way to do this is to combine engagement with sanctions, so long as Iran refuses to fulfill the requirements of

UN Security Council resolutions. Any new sanctions should be presented as the logical consequences of Ahmadinezhad's confrontational policies.

Widening the Gap Between the People and the Regime. For twenty years, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has consistently said that the greatest threat to the Islamic Republic is a Western cultural invasion, which could lead women, youth, and intellectuals to spark a velvet revolution. Khamenei and his cadre offer the events since the June election as proof of these dangers.

Imposing sanctions on human rights violations is an effective way to widen the gap between the people and the Iranian regime. Such sanctions can be of dual use when those most responsible for the continuation of the nuclear and missile programs -- which the Security Council has ordered suspended -- are also those most responsible for repression in Iran. If such sanctions are to be approved by the Security Council, it may be necessary that the debate emphasize counterproliferation in order to secure Russian and Chinese support. The United States and others can highlight the human rights aspect once the resolution has passed.

Moreover, in the face of human rights abuses, the EU and the United States have several times issued human rights sanctions without UN backing, such as in the cases of Burma and Zimbabwe. These types of sanctions are generally more effective if they are endorsed by many industrialized countries, which is a possibility in this case. Canada, for instance, is highly vocal about human rights abuses in Iran. To implement non-UN-backed sanctions on Iran, the United States would almost certainly require new executive orders that would serve to underscore the gravity with which Obama views the Iran problem.

Iranian reformers have been afraid that the international community will adopt sanctions for nuclear -- not human rights -- reasons. In some respects, the reformers are quite correct; sanctions that would most likely secure Chinese and Russian support in the Security Council would be focused on the nuclear program. Moreover, Europe and the United States care much more about the nuclear impasse than they do about Iranian democracy. But the two issues are not entirely separate. The international community -- or just the West -- may decide that sanctions, by widening the split between the hardline rulers and the people, would affect the strategic reasoning of Iran's leaders.

Prospects for Success. One of the great difficulties in inducing Iran to change its nuclear policies is that Khamenei and his associates seemingly believe that the West will pursue the overthrow of the Islamic Republic no matter what happens. Ahmadinezhad, on the other hand, seems more optimistic; he thinks the international community will allow Iran to pursue its present policies, and therefore welcomes engagement because he expects the West to capitulate. That eventuality, however, seems unlikely.

If the Iranian regime were willing to agree to a nuclear deal that is acceptable to the West, the United States and its allies might well be prepared to abandon the Iranian democratic movement. This consequence, however, may not be too problematic for the Iranian democratic cause. Iran's leaders may be reading the situation correctly: they worry that the incentives proposed by the West, such as enhanced economic interaction and opportunities for Iranians to cooperate with

their Western colleagues, are in fact a Trojan horse. Indeed, if a resolution to the nuclear impasse led to a greater opening of Iran to the outside world, the outcome might well be a strengthening of all the elements in Iranian society that undermine the hardline regime's grip on power.

Iranian Leaders' Concerns Regarding the Nuclear Negotiations

The post-election protests -- not the nuclear negotiations -- has been the main topic in Iranian political circles ever since June 2009. Not only does this reflect the usual trumping of foreign affairs by local politics -- a situation certainly not unique to Iran -- it also indicates how delicate Iran's domestic political situation has become.

For twenty years, Khamenei has warned of the dangers posed to the Islamic Republic by the West's cultural invasion. He has stated that the West will provoke a "velvet revolution" similar to that in Czechoslovakia in 1989, which witnessed the very rapid overthrow of an apparently rock-solid government. From Khamenei's perspective, the events of the past three months demonstrate his prescience. The initial campaign efforts of the rather uncharismatic Mousavi were pathetic, yet by the end of the campaign, especially after the televised debate between Mousavi and Ahmadinezhad, hundreds of thousands of people were effusive in their support of him. A conspiratorial mind might see evidence of powerful forces behind Mousavi. Indeed, forces were behind him, but they were former presidents Khatami and Rafsanjani -- not the West.

In response, Khamenei decided to crush hope: he ordered vote rigging so blatant as to show that no election would be allowed to change the system; he then stepped forward to acknowledge his support for Ahmadinezhad's policy stances, rather than remaining above the fray. Furthermore, he has repeatedly blamed protestors in ways that have inflamed passions against him and the system he represents. In short, Khamenei was so afraid of a velvet revolution that he has provoked one.

The protests have likely confirmed in Khamenei's mind his oft-stated view that the nuclear issue is simply a Western excuse to advance its plot to overthrow the Islamic Republic. In the show trials following the June 12 presidential election, prosecutors have been airing wild charges of a far-reaching conspiracy involving Iranian reformers and Western governments. In these trials, even well-known German sociologists Max Weber (1864-1920) and Jurgen Habermas, as well as British political scientist John Keane, were accused of inspiring Iranian reformists to overthrow the regime. Khamenei has now eclipsed this: last month, he attacked the teaching of the humanities, stating that "teaching these academic disciplines in universities leads to skepticism of religious and ideological principles." Khamenei believes that the humanities are colonialist tools of the West for conquering Muslim minds.

In this atmosphere, Khamenei apparently worries that if the nuclear issue is resolved, the West would find another excuse with which to advance its true goal of cultural invasion. To him, any compromise on the nuclear issue will only feed the West's efforts to overthrow him. No matter how often Washington reiterates its willingness to work with Khamenei's Islamic Republic, he is not likely to believe a word of it. He has shown no interest in resolving outstanding differences with the West. In his sermon last Friday, Khamenei stated: "The enmity of America, Britain, and the Zionists with Iran is a matter of pride for the nation, and this should not frighten us or force

us to give up before the enemy."

Khamenei, however, is correct about one point: Every Western government would be delighted to see Iran's hardliners lose power and the Islamic Republic morph into a more democratic system.

Policy Implications. The fear of a velvet revolution, accompanied by the deep fissure within the Iranian elite, seriously complicates efforts to negotiate with Iran. Khamenei, given his views of the West, may see little advantage in resolving the nuclear impasse. Even if he decides to engage the West -- and no evidence suggests that he will -- forging a consensus among the badly divided Iranian elite to permit such a bold change of direction would be no easy feat.

Ahmadinezhad, however, has long wanted to use international negotiations to raise his profile, as evidenced by his letters to various world leaders and his offers to debate President Barack Obama. The Iranian president's main objective, it would seem, is to use his platform to promote his ideological, apocalyptic, and anti-Western agenda, which fits his argument that public diplomacy is the main field of battle for Islamic radicals. Ahmadinezhad may also believe that the West has to concede to Iranian demands; that is, strike a deal that allows Iran to keep its nuclear program. Khamenei, however, is not so confident; he is more worried about Iran's disadvantages in any negotiations with the West.

In addition, Iran's hardliners are unconventional adversaries who may respond to typical negotiating strategies in unusual ways. Iranian hardliners may fear the West's carrots, believing that its offers for closer engagement are a plot for soft overthrow by those groups in Iranian society -- intellectuals, businessmen, youth, and women -- whom the hardliners fear. Likewise, the hardliners may welcome the prospects of Western sticks, believing that sanctions or a military strike would inflict little damage and may rally nationalist support.

Although the current prospects for successful engagement with Iran are poor, the West has little choice other than to try. Iran's leaders may decide -- despite their deep mistrust of the West -- that it would be too much of a gamble to ignore an offer from a popular U.S. president who is obviously eager to engage with Iran. After all, Iran has been hard hit by the global economic downturn, Ahmadinezhad's ideological and economic policies, and by Western sanctions. In addition, the threat of Israeli military action against Iran looms in the background. Despite these factors, no one should have any illusions: the West is not going to shake the Iranian hardline conviction that the West is out to overthrow the Islamic Republic.