

Yes, a Nuclear Iran Is Unacceptable

A Memo to President-elect Obama

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We cannot allow Iran to get a nuclear weapon. It would be a game-changer in the region. Not only would it threaten Israel, our strongest ally in the region and one of our strongest allies in the world, but it would also create a possibility of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists. And so it's unacceptable. And I will do everything that's required to prevent it. And we will never take military options off the table.

—Barack Obama,
Second Presidential Debate¹

PRESIDENT-ELECT OBAMA, you are right that the United States cannot allow Iran to attain a nuclear weapon. Your statement during the second presidential debate indicates that you appreciate the unacceptable dangers posed by a nuclear-capable Iran. But statements like the following indicate a lack of understanding about the past record of failed attempts to negotiate with Iran:

Question: [W]ould you be willing to meet separately, without precondition, during the first year of your administration, in Washington or anywhere else, with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba and North Korea, in order to bridge the gap that divides our countries?...

Obama: I would.²

Your Administration must learn from the experience of previous Administrations and European governments that have sought negotiations with Iran. The diplomatic path is not promising. Iran has strongly resisted international efforts to pressure it to abide by its legal commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and halt its suspect



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nuclear activities. Iran's President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, defiantly proclaimed last year that "Iran has obtained the technology to produce nuclear fuel, and Iran's move is like a train...which has no brake and no reverse gear."³

The diplomatic route would be more promising if the regime in Tehran was motivated primarily by a desire to advance Iran's national interests and promote the welfare of its people, but Iran's revolutionary Islamist regime is more interested in maintaining a brutal grip on power and spreading Islamist revolution. Ahmadinejad rose through the ranks of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which was created after Iran's 1979 revolution to defend and promote Ayatollah Khomeini's radical vision of revolutionary Shia Islam, and is committed to returning to the ideological purity of the revolution's early years.

But we must be careful not to personalize the problem. Iran's nuclear program began under President Rafsanjani and flourished under President Khatami. Both were considered "moderates," extolled by some observers as leaders with whom the West could do business, but both also practiced diplomacy by *taqiyyah*, which is a religiously sanctioned form of dissimulation or duplicity.

If you sat down with President Ahmadinejad without preconditions, as you said you would, you would hand him an opportunity to practice his own *taqiyyah*, strut on the world stage, lecture you about the supposed superiority of Iran's Islamic system, and assert Iran's claim to leadership of the Muslim world. Such a meeting would dishearten Iran's repressed opposition, strengthen Ahmadinejad's hard-liners at the expense of reformist groups, give Ahmadinejad a boost in popularity that could greatly improve his chances of being re-elected if the meeting occurred before Iran's June elections, and allow him to go through the motions of a diplomatic dialogue to defuse international pressure while Iran continues its nuclear efforts.

1. CNN, "Transcript of Second McCain, Obama Debate," October 7, 2008, at <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/10/07/presidential.debate.transcript> (December 3, 2008).

2. CNN, "Part I: CNN/YouTube Democratic Presidential Debate Transcript," July 23, 2007, at <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/07/23/debate.transcript> (December 3, 2008).

3. Reuters, "Iran's Atomic Work Has No 'Reverse Gear,'" February 25, 2007, at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUKBLA53622220070225> (December 3, 2008).

Your nominee as Secretary of State, Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY), rejected meeting with Ahmadinejad without preconditions, saying during the July 2007 YouTube debate that "I don't want to be used for propaganda purposes." The next day, she blasted your willingness to sit down with Iran's president: "I thought that was irresponsible and frankly naïve."⁴ You should take the advice of your nominee and rethink your position on meeting with Iran's leader.

The U.S. should mobilize an international coalition to raise the diplomatic, economic, domestic political, and potential military costs to Tehran of continuing to flout its obligations under its nuclear safeguards agreements. This coalition should seek to isolate the regime, weaken it through targeted economic sanctions, explain to the Iranian people why their government's nuclear policies will impose economic costs and military risks on them, contain and deter Iran's military power, and encourage democratic change.

To drive home your point that an Iranian nuclear weapon is "unacceptable," you should craft an Iran policy that includes the following important elements:

- **Recognize that the U.N. is a diplomatic dead end that will continue to do too little, too late to stop Iran's drive for nuclear weapons.** The United States has sought to coax another sanctions resolution out of the U.N. Security Council, which has passed three rounds of limited sanctions on Iran, but past U.S. and European efforts to ratchet up sanctions against Iran have been frustrated by Russia and China. Both countries have lucrative trade relationships with and strategic ties to Tehran, and both have used their veto power as members of the Security Council to delay and dilute efforts to impose sanctions.

If strong, concerted international action had been taken five years ago, shortly after Iran's concealment of its uranium enrichment activities was revealed, the rising economic and international costs of its nuclear defiance might have led Tehran to reconsider its drive for nuclear weapons, but such action is less likely now than ever

4. Associated Press, "Clinton: Obama Is 'Naïve' on Foreign Policy," July 24, 2007, at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19933710/> (December 3, 2008).

before. Given Moscow's increasingly confrontational behavior and threats to retaliate for international criticism of its invasion of Georgia, the Security Council is sure to remain ineffective in addressing the Iranian nuclear issue because of the threat of a Russian veto. Moreover, Russia is upgrading its ties with Iran. On September 18, Russia announced plans to sell more military equipment to Iran, including new anti-aircraft missiles that Iran could deploy to protect its illicit nuclear weapons program.

- **Recognize that attempts to negotiate a diplomatic deal with Iran represent the triumph of wishful thinking over past experience.** Under Ahmadinejad's predecessors, Iran concealed and lied about its nuclear program for two decades before admitting that it had built a secret uranium enrichment plant at Natanz in 2003. When confronted, Tehran agreed to suspend its uranium enrichment program, undoubtedly out of fear of a U.S.-led intervention after America took military action to remove regimes in neighboring states led by Saddam Hussein and the Taliban.

Iran engaged in a half-hearted charade of negotiations with Britain, France, and Germany—the EU-3—in which it temporarily froze its uranium enrichment efforts, only to resume such dangerous activities after Ahmadinejad was installed in power in 2005 and the perceived threat of a possible U.S. military strike diminished. Tehran perceived that the international situation had shifted in its favor. The U.S. faced deteriorating security conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan, in part because of Iranian meddling; oil prices surged, insulating Iran from the threat of sanctions; and Iran cultivated Russia and China to fend off effective sanctions at the U.N. Security Council.

Despite this, there are continuing calls for further attempts to reach a “grand bargain” in which Iran would pledge to abandon its nuclear efforts and support for terrorism in exchange for various economic carrots and security guarantees. However, the prospects for such a grand bargain are grossly overstated and ignore the past history of U.S. diplomatic efforts to reach an accommodation with Iran, which exploited and

sabotaged U.S. efforts at engagement during the Carter, Reagan, and Clinton Administrations.

Hopeful talk about a new effort at rapprochement represents the triumph of wishful thinking over disappointing experience. The simple truth is that Iranian hard-liners do not want genuinely improved relations with the United States. Not only do they see the U.S. as the “Great Satan,” but they fear the temptations that the “Great Satan” can offer. They know that two previous Iranian revolutions were aborted by the defection of Westernized elites, and they fear that better relations with the U.S. will pose a growing threat to their hold on power. Moreover, making the hard compromises that would be necessary to open the door to improved relations would undermine the legitimacy of their revolutionary ideology and weaken their claim to leadership of the Muslim world.

Tehran may go through the motions of a diplomatic dialogue, as it often has in the past, to deflect pressure for more international sanctions and temporarily defuse the nuclear standoff. But a Grand Bargain strategy is likely to result in endless talks about talks that will only enable Iran to buy time to run out the clock, as it completes a nuclear weapon.

- **Recognize that diplomatic carrots alone won't work because for Tehran, attaining a nuclear weapon is the biggest carrot.** The EU-3 diplomatic outreach was heavily based on the offer of economic benefits, technological assistance, and improved diplomatic relations in exchange for Iran's halting of its uranium enrichment activities, but these incentives pale in comparison with the advantages that the regime believes it will attain with a nuclear weapons capability. What is needed is greater focus on tougher disincentives for continuation of Iran's suspect nuclear efforts, including its perceived economic, domestic political, and potential military costs. When Tehran perceives these potential costs as very high, as it did after the overthrow of regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, it will be more likely to make concessions and freeze its uranium enrichment program. To give diplomacy a chance, the United States and its allies must credibly threaten to impose rising

costs on the regime, particularly in ways that threaten its hold on power, which is its highest priority.

Opening an interest section would be in the national interest only if American diplomats received ironclad safeguards against terrorism and hostage-taking, which is not possible as long as Iran continues its efforts to support terrorism against American troops, coalition allies, and Iraqis. Your Administration must also be cognizant of the timing of any offer, which could be construed as a sign of weakness by Tehran. Making an offer before Iran's June elections would enhance Ahmadinejad's political prospects and should be avoided.

- **Lead an international coalition to impose the strongest possible targeted economic sanctions against Iran.** The U.S. should try to toughen sanctions against Iran outside of the U.N. framework by working directly with its Japanese and European allies to impose the strongest possible bans on foreign investment, loans, and trade with Iran. The Achilles' heel of Iran's theocratic regime is its mishandling of the economy. There is growing dissatisfaction with this mismanagement and with corruption, high unemployment, and soaring inflation—officially reported at a 30 percent annual rate in September but believed to be higher. There is rising labor unrest. In October, tire factory workers demonstrated in front of the Labor Ministry to protest the failure of factories to pay six months of unpaid back wages. That same month, bazaar merchants rebelled against the imposition of a value-added tax, closing down the bazaars in many cities and forcing the regime to postpone its implementation. The bazaaris had been a cornerstone of support for the revolution against the shah.

Ayatollah Khomeini famously said, "We did not create a revolution to lower the price of melons." But Iran's current leaders lack the personal charisma, religious authority, and popular support needed to ignore the growing backlash against their dysfunctional economic policies, repression of human rights, and failure to meet the needs of the Iranian people. Falling oil prices will further aggravate Iran's festering economic problems and make sanctions more painful.

An international ban on the import of Iranian oil is a non-starter. It is unrealistic to expect oil importers to stop importing Iranian oil in a tight, high-priced oil market. Instead, the focus should be on denying Iran loans, foreign investment, and favorable trade deals. The U.S. should cooperate with other countries to deny Iran loans from such international financial institutions as the World Bank and any loans for a proposed natural gas pipeline to India via Pakistan.

Although Iran is one of the world's leading oil exporters, it must import approximately 40 percent of its gasoline needs due to mismanagement and inadequate investment in refinery infrastructure. An international ban on gasoline exports to Iran would drive up the price of Iranian gasoline and underscore the shortsightedness of the regime in the eyes of the Iranian people.

- **Mobilize allies to contain and deter Iran.** Iran's continued support for terrorism and its prospective emergence as a nuclear power threaten many countries. Ahmadinejad's belligerence gives Washington greater opportunity to mobilize other states, particularly those in the growing shadow of Iranian power. The United States should maintain a strong naval and air presence in the Persian Gulf to deter Iran and strengthen military cooperation with the Gulf States, which are growing increasingly anxious about Iran's hard-line government.

The U.S. and its European allies should strengthen military, intelligence, and security cooperation with such threatened states as Iraq, Turkey, Israel, and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), which was founded in 1981 to provide collective security for Arab states threatened by Iran. Such a coalition could help both to contain the expansion of Iranian power and to facilitate military action, if necessary, against Iran. Washington should also offer to deploy or sell anti-ballistic missile defense systems to threatened states, enhance joint military planning, and step up joint military exercises focused on the Iranian threat.

- **Maintain the U.S. commitment to building a stable and democratic Iraq.** A cornerstone of any policy to contain Iran must be strong support for an independent, democratic Iraq that is an ally in the war against terrorism. On January 20, you will become the commander in chief of the war in Iraq, and it will no longer be “Bush’s war.” You must reconsider your pledge to withdraw U.S. combat forces from Iraq within 16 months. While this pledge may have made political sense during the campaign when you mistakenly concluded that the war was lost, such a policy will be disastrous if you cling to it as President. It is now clear that the surge has been a success and the war is winnable. If you remain committed to a rapid pullout according to an arbitrary deadline, you risk squandering the hard-won gains of the surge and plunging Iraq into a humanitarian catastrophe that will jeopardize U.S. national security interests, threaten the stability of the oil-rich Persian Gulf, and leave Iraq more vulnerable to Iranian meddling.

Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has called a withdrawal timetable “dangerous.” You should accept his advice and the considered judgment of military professionals including General David Petraeus, the Commander of Central Command, in adopting a policy of gradual withdrawal and continued support for building Iraqi security forces. You should warn Tehran that continued meddling in Iraq, particularly cross-border support for the “special groups” and other forces hostile to the Iraqi government, will destroy the possibility of better relations with the United States, slow the pace of withdrawal of U.S. combat forces, and increase the size of the residual force that you have promised to maintain in Iraq to assist the Iraqi government in fighting terrorism.

- **Set conditions on any talks with Tehran that minimize Iran’s ability to exploit such talks to defuse international opposition to its hostile foreign policy.** One last attempt at a negotiated solution to the nuclear impasse may be necessary, if only to set the stage for the use of military force as a last resort, but your Administration must be careful

not to hand Tehran the opportunity to go through the motions of diplomatic dialogue in order to undermine international support for economic sanctions and military action while it continues its nuclear program in secret. Given Iran’s long history of *taqiyyah* diplomacy, duplicity, and denial on the nuclear issue, the United States should enter into direct diplomatic talks only if there is a clear understanding that the talks are not open-ended and that Iran must halt its suspect nuclear activities and agree to robust IAEA inspections of its nuclear facilities for the talks to continue beyond a reasonable time limit—one that is measured in weeks, not months. The talks should be conducted through the State Department, not the White House, and the President should rule out any meeting with Iran’s leaders unless they have agreed to halt their nuclear weapons program.

- **Support democratic opposition forces within Iran.** A strategy of regime change is problematic and unlikely to succeed before Iran attains a nuclear weapon. The U.S. cannot depend on exile groups. The future of Iran will be determined by groups that have strength on the ground inside Iran. There is considerable grumbling at a lack of freedom, human rights abuses, corruption, and economic problems but no certainty that such grumbling will lead to meaningful change any time soon. A well-educated group of young reformers are seeking to replace the current mullahcracy with a genuine democracy that is accountable to the Iranian people. They were demoralized by former President Khatami’s failure to live up to his promises of reform and by his lack of support for the student uprisings of 1999, but a growing popular disenchantment with the policies of President Ahmadinejad is likely to re-energize them.

The U.S. and its allies should discreetly support all Iranian opposition groups that reject terrorism and advocate democracy by publicizing their activities both internationally and within Iran, giving them organizational training, and inviting them to attend international conferences and workshops outside of Iran. Educational exchanges with Western students would help to bolster and open up communications with Iran’s

restive students, who historically have played a leading role in their country's reform movements. The U.S. should covertly subsidize opposition publications and organizing efforts, as it did to aid the anti-Communist opposition during the Cold War in Europe and Asia. However, such programs should be strictly segregated from public outreach efforts by the U.S. and its allies in order to avoid putting Iranian participants in international forums at risk of arrest or persecution when they return home.

America should not try to play favorites among the various Iranian opposition groups, but should instead encourage them to cooperate under the umbrella of the broadest possible coalition.

- **Launch a public diplomacy campaign to explain to the Iranian people how the regime's nuclear weapons program and hard-line policies hurt their economic and national interests.** Iran's clerical regime has tightened its grip on the media in recent years, shutting down more than 100 independent newspapers, jailing journalists, closing down Web sites, and arresting bloggers. The U.S. and its allies should work to defeat the regime's suppression of independent media by increasing Farsi broadcasts by such government-sponsored media as the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe (Radio Farda), and other information sources. The free flow of information is essential to the free flow of political ideas. The Iranian people need access to information about the activities of opposition groups, both within and outside of Iran, and the plight of dissidents.
- **Prepare for the use of military force as a last resort.** You have wisely promised that "we will never take military options off the table." There is no guaranteed policy that can halt the Iranian nuclear program short of war, and even a military campaign may only delay Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability. But U.S. policymaking regarding the Iranian nuclear issue inevitably boils down to a search for the least-bad option, and as potentially costly and risky as a preventive war against Iran would be, allowing Iran to acquire nuclear weapons could result in far heavier costs and risks.

The U.S. could probably deter Iran from a direct nuclear attack by threatening massive retaliation and the assured destruction of the Iranian regime, but there is lingering doubt that Ahmadinejad, who reportedly harbors apocalyptic religious beliefs regarding the return of the *Mahdi*, would have the same cost-benefit calculus about a nuclear war that other leaders would have. Moreover, his regime might risk passing nuclear weapons off to terrorist surrogates in hopes of escaping retaliation for a nuclear surprise attack launched by an unknown attacker.

Moreover, even if Iran could be deterred from considering such attacks, an Iranian nuclear breakout would undermine the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and trigger a nuclear arms race in the Middle East that could lead Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, and Algeria to seek to build or acquire their own nuclear weapons. Each new nuclear power would multiply the risks and uncertainties in an already volatile region.

Iran also might be emboldened to step up its support for terrorism and subversion, calculating that its nuclear capability would deter a military response. An Iranian miscalculation could easily lead to a military clash with the U.S. or an American ally that would impose exponentially higher costs than would be imposed by a war with a non-nuclear Iran. All of these risks must be considered before deciding on how to proceed if diplomacy fails to prevent the prospect of a nuclear Iran.

Conclusion

Preventing a nuclear Iran is one of the most difficult and dangerous problems that confronts your Administration. You should learn from the experience of past efforts to negotiate with Iran and deal with Tehran from a position of strength, stressing sticks rather than carrots, because for Iran, a nuclear weapon is the biggest carrot. Targeted economic sanctions and the possible use of military force are your biggest sources of leverage. The only hope of aborting the Iranian nuclear bomb lies in convincing Iran's leaders that the economic, diplomatic, and possible military costs of continuing their nuclear program are so high that they

threaten the regime's hold on power. Any talks with Iran should be structured to produce quick results and preclude Tehran from stretching out the negotiations indefinitely.

You should rule out a presidential meeting with Iranian leaders until they have agreed to end their nuclear weapons

efforts in a verifiable manner based on intrusive international inspections. Accepting anything less will only give Iran's radical regime yet another opportunity to renege on their commitments when it suits their purposes.

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