

# Why Talk With Iran?

By Michael Oren and Seth Robinson  
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The issue of America dialogue with Iran featured prominently in Friday's presidential debate. Barack Obama pledged "to engage in tough, direct diplomacy with Iran." John McCain denounced that notion as "naive" and "dangerous."

This exchange capped a week in which five former secretaries of state, including Henry Kissinger and Colin Powell, called for talks between the United States and Iran and when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad assured the United Nations General Assembly that "the American empire is reaching the end of the road."

Amid all of these declarations, though, few questions were raised about the possible benefits of U.S.-Iranian talks as well as the potential pitfalls. What, for example, would be the talks' objectives -- to moderate Iranian behavior and renew Iranian-American relations or, more broadly, to recognize a new strategic order in the Middle East? What concessions might the Iranians seek from the U.S., and which would America be prepared to yield? And finally, how would the discussions affect America's allies in the region, its forces in Iraq, and its strategic standing world-wide?

Any attempt to talk with Iran must take into account its previous negotiations with the international community. These began without preconditions in 2003 in talks between Iran and Britain, France and Germany. The most recent round took place in Geneva last July and included the chief European Union negotiator Javier Solana and William Burns, U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs.

In exchange for opening their nuclear plants to inspection, the Iranians have been offered immunity from sanctions, membership in the World Trade Organization, and an energy partnership with Europe to modernize Iran's oil industry.

In addition, Iran would have received a fully fueled nuclear reactor to service the country's agricultural and medical needs. It would have been welcomed into a Persian Gulf security forum and enlisted in efforts to rid the Middle East of weapons of mass destruction. Most generously, Iran could have continued to enrich uranium for verifiably peaceful purposes. Iran's response to these far-reaching concessions was consistently and categorically "no."

In addition to nuclear issues, American interlocutors must also address the question of Iranian expansionism. Through its Hezbollah and Hamas proxies, Iran has gained dominance over Lebanon and Gaza, and through its Baathist and Mahdist allies, has extended its influence through Syria and Iraq. An Iranian threat looms over the Persian Gulf financial centers and beyond, to the European cities within Iranian missile range. No attempt has yet been made to induce Iran to roll back or even curtail the export of its violent revolution, nor have the global powers seriously considered such a package.

Clearly, any U.S.-Iranian dialogue must exceed previous efforts and produce a unique array of concessions and incentives. The U.S. embassy in Tehran (closed since the 1979 hostage crisis) might be reopened, sanctions could be reduced, and Iran's regional prominence acknowledged. Assurances could also be given that the U.S. will not seek regime change in Tehran and that American forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf pose no threat to Iranian security.

None of these gestures, however, are likely to alter Iranian policies. It is unclear whether Iran would even agree to reopen the U.S. embassy. A proposal in January 2008 to establish an American visa office in Tehran, though welcomed by Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, was denounced by

Supreme Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as a CIA ploy.

Nor are the Iranians apt to respond dramatically to any easing of the sanctions that have so far failed to persuade them to moderate. Moreover, recognizing Iranian ascendancy means legitimizing Hamas and Hezbollah while weakening America's allies in Israel, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority.

Radical Shiite militias would also be empowered, eroding America's recent gains in Iraq and impelling Sunni states to procure their own -- possibly nuclear -- means of defense. The United States could abjure any hostility toward Iran, but with its forces in the area already overstretched, such promises would invariably ring empty.

Rather than improving U.S.-Iranian relations and enhancing Middle East stability, any American offer to dialogue with Iran is liable to be interpreted as a sign of American weakness, and not only in Tehran. Public opinion throughout the region will conclude that the United States has at last surrendered to the reality of Iranian rule. The damage to America's regional, if not global influence, could prove irreversible.

Yet dialoguing with Iran presents the even graver danger that Iran will use it as camouflage to complete its nuclear ambitions. That goal, according to U.S. and U.N. intelligence sources, could be achieved as early as 2010, and the Iranians could pass the interim blithely negotiating with the United States. And even if Iran agreed to halt the enrichment process, it might replicate the North Korean model: negotiate with the United States, agree to suspend nuclear activities, then renew them at the first opportunity.

It is difficult to take issue with a presidential hopeful who views talks with Tehran as a "way to keep America safe," and with seasoned secretaries of state. However, the stakes in the proposed talks with Iran are too critical to remain unweighed.

The next president may in the end try to engage in discussions with Iran. To avoid disaster, his approach must be conducted within well-defined parameters, including the cessation of uranium enrichment by Iran and any end to its support for terrorism.

Negotiations must be time-limited as well, and accompanied by intensified sanctions and a credible military threat. The United States can communicate with Iran, but as a power and not a supplicant, and with leverage as well as words.

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