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TOWARD A NEW POLICY ON IRAN

BY HEINTZ, LUERS, PICKERING AND WISNER
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I INTRODUCTION: US-Iran relations are never ripe for an opening but there is high risk to continuing to put it off. We propose that you urge the President to instruct you to open a direct relationship with Iran. That might begin by a letter of congratulations to Foreign Minister Salehi offering to work with him toward a new relationship. The burden rests on the US to convince an uncertain Iranian leadership to come out of its shell. The next few months offer an opportune moment for a new policy. The 2010 sanctions are taking a toll on Iran but are not changing Iran's behavior. The Iranian government has moved in a more repressive direction against the opposition and for consolidation of Khamenei/Ahmadinejad power, with an increasing role of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

The Administration has a responsibility and an opportunity now to take initiatives in 2011 that will diminish the possibility of conflict and enhance the US role in the Middle East. We try to answer below: Why now? What are the elements of a new policy? How to get started?

II Why Now?

A. The Administration's 2009 moves to reset US policy in the Middle East and the Islamic world have been well received by most Islamic nations but undercut by Iran. A US policy of isolating Iran is comforting and easier than alternatives but it also weakens the larger US objectives of resetting our role in the region. A new US policy toward Iran would enhance the administration's regional strategy and return the US to being a strategic player rather than a polarizing one.

B. The President's initiatives to engage Iran last year failed. The Iranian expectations for corrective actions from the Obama administration have been high. Iran's self image as an aggrieved

victim of the US perfidy and efforts at regime change, provide a partial explanation for the Iranian unresponsiveness. Another factor has been Iran's domestic turmoil, almost unprecedented since the 1979 revolution. As a result the leadership has been even more immobilized than usual on whether and under what conditions to meet with American officials. Now is the time to return with even greater authority in an effort to talk to the Iranians (C below). ~~Why now is a key question. Not clear the answer is here in the paper. We did say the longer it drags out the harder it becomes. A change in tactics re sanctions and signs of moving away from regime change can help condition the atmosphere. Iran is engaged in buying time and the task is to make clear that is an approach which leads only to danger and potential conflict by accident or failure to develop other opportunities.~~

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C. Significant US steps toward engagement now would surprise Iran's leaders. A new policy now would be more effective in changing Iranian behavior than the sanctions have been. The multilateral agreements in 2010 to strengthen the sanctions against Iran have sent a strong message to the Iranian leadership about the seriousness of the Obama administration. But the sanctions have also reinforced Iran's determination to stay the course. Iran's leaders perceive US policies over the past 30 years of seeking to isolate, punish, threaten, subvert, sanction, intimidate, and overthrow if possible Iran as a permanent fixture of American foreign policy. They have been successful in convincing the Iranian public that they are right. Now is the time to engage the Iranians with a new and determined US policy.

D. Failure to reach an agreement soon on Iran's nuclear program will increase the risk that Iran will have the capacity to develop a nuclear weapon. The decision to continue to deploy UNSC sanctions as our "weapon of choice" for stopping Iran's enrichment of uranium has failed. This policy has contributed to making Iran's nuclear program (not a nuclear bomb) a symbol of national unity and pride. As the UNSC approves more sanctions Iran builds more centrifuges. This US insistence on having some suspension of enrichment or a deal on their nuclear program as a precondition for talks on other subjects has led both countries into a dead end. The resulting confrontation

seems likely to allow Iran the time to develop a nuclear bomb and as a result eventually toward potential conflict as the only option.

Although the US has stressed that it is following a two track policy toward Iran, in fact the diplomatic track has been mainly in the successful diplomatic effort to expand sanctions. A new US policy must give Iran reasons to limit its nuclear program to peaceful purposes. We should consider an approach that provides enrichment in Iran under international supervision but such a discussion awaits a US decision and must be coordinated with the other members of the P-5.

E. The consequences of a failure in US policy toward Iran will severely damage US interest's world wide. US military action against Iran is unthinkable as a strategy or as the consequence of no strategy. Military conflict would gravely set back our programs in Iraq and Afghanistan, further derail the peace process, and perhaps lead to a regional war involving Israel, some Arab states and Hezbollah and Hamas. A new toll of human life in the Islamic world would be catastrophic for the goals of resetting US policy with consequences for US interests from Morocco to South East Asia. The consequences of prolonging the current policy without accomplishing any of its objectives will degrade US authority and power. Another consequence will be the missed opportunity to engage Iran in a long term constructive regional strategy:

1) To put in place a crisis management understanding that will reduce the possibility of US-Iran conflict in the Gulf or over Iraq and Afghanistan.

2) To deal directly with Iran over its nuclear program.

3) To help establish a regional security structure aimed at giving Iran and the Gulf states a greater sense of stability.

4) To build a regional stabilization program for Afghanistan and Iraq,

5) To carry out a joint program to reduce drug trafficking,

6) To develop a coordinated effort to deal with refugees in the region.

7) To develop together approaches to weaken the Taliban and destroy Qa'eda and eventually to weaken Iran's support for Hamas and Hezbollah.

8) To develop other common approaches to serious issues in the region where U.S. and Iranian interests are at play – drugs, refugees are examples.

III WHAT ARE THE ELEMENTS OF A NEW POLICY? The US should make a determined and carefully designed effort to get the Iranians to the table. The risks of delaying this relationship are getting higher. Any new policy toward Iran should begin with the following characteristics.

- A. A new policy must engender a positive decision from the Supreme Leader and his advisors and thus must be seen to come from the President and have his full commitment to its implementation.** It must aim in the first instance at defining a framework of negotiations that address all outstanding issues between the US and Iran.
- B. It must eliminate suggestions to Iran that the suspension of enrichment or some other “progress” on our nuclear demands is a precondition for any progress to direct talks.** The Iranians still believe that broader talks on a full range of issues with the US based on mutual respect and justice will only happen if Iran suspends enrichment. This Iranian posture is partially a reflection of their paranoia and insecurity in dealing with the US. But fruitful discussions on nuclear issues are only likely to come after Iran has determined that the US seriously seeks a bilateral relationship based on mutual respect for each other’s interests, concerns and role in the region.
- C. The US should achieve an arrangement with Iran that would maximize IAEA and other international access to and monitoring of Iran’s nuclear program.** As the US sets aside its zero enrichment preconditions for any progress in the talks, it should link Iran’s assurances that it will not build a nuclear bomb to a new agreement. That agreement should provide for intrusive inspections from the IAEA and multilateral or international management of their enrichment program.
- D. A US offer to cooperate with Iran as an equal partner on one or more non-nuclear issues will set the stage for more fruitful**

discussion of the nuclear issue. The US will improve markedly chances to get Iran to deal seriously with the nuclear issues by starting with an offer to cooperate on other problems in the region. The Iranians do not want to “talk” or “negotiate” with the US. Small gestures such as direct flights to Tehran from the US and liberalizing travel restrictions on their diplomats in the US might help but not change the situation significantly. They want to work together with the US. The issues that would demonstrate a serious US intention to work with Iran would be:

- a. Create crisis management mechanisms to deal with the possibility of incidents in the Gulf or in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- b. Renew the cooperation on Afghanistan (that was cut off in January 2002).
- c. Seek cooperation on Iraq (in anticipation of further US force draw down) building on the bilateral talks that took place in Baghdad several years ago.
- d. Seek cooperation on controlling drug trafficking along the Afghan border and more broadly.

E. Take actions that will signal to Iran’s leaders that the US has genuinely rejected a regime change strategy. Oral assurances have not been sufficient. The Iranians have appreciated President Obama’s rhetorical outreach but argue that the rhetoric has not been matched with any material change in US actions. Such steps would include a decision to reduce or cease ~~for a period of time~~ some executive branch actions taken against Iran, particularly ~~any~~ some covert political military activities (with the exception of efforts to delay or disrupt their progress on enrichment) that Iran’s leaders might identify as part of the US strategy of regime change.

F. One way to begin a new effort at engagement would be for the Secretary of State to send a letter to the new Iranian Foreign Minister Salehi congratulating him on his new position and suggesting a willingness to work with him toward a new era in US-Iranian relations. Such a letter might be delivered directly through the Iranian Permanent Representative to the United

Nations along with the oral message to the Supreme Leader that we recommend below.

G. Set a new tone in reciprocal communications including a moratorium on the rhetorical attacks from leaders on both sides. The President and cabinet members would constrain their threats and red lines on Iranian behavior, make clear at every opportunity that the US does not have a policy of regime change and agree to open up the entire range of bilateral issues that are particularly important to the Iranians. Astute subtle gestures on both sides can diminish the distrust. The Iranian leadership would be asked to agree to comparable restraint in relation to the US. Our overall goal is to secure Iranian recognition that we are legitimate players in the region, have interests and will defend them. At the same time, we will not seek to destabilize Iran's domestic order. We can compete peacefully on the playing field of ideas, without challenging the legitimacy of each other's interests.

H. Establish a formal structure through which the two governments will communicate directly. But diplomatic relations should not be sought at the outset. One early priority will be for both sides to empower a senior representative to conduct regular discussions on official business. Key communications should go through one established channel, agree to avoid informal back channels, and seek progressively to raise the level of those authorized officials. Each side will want to establish a bilateral process to manage the multiple bilateral incidents and problems such as arrested nationals and travel of Iranian diplomats at the UN. Iranian officials have underscored their reluctance to establish diplomatic relations for now since they have a long history of distrust for the purposes and activities of a US Embassy in Tehran.

IV. HOW TO GET STARTED?

A. The President must find a way to communicate directly with the Supreme Leader a US desire to open official talks.

Further written communications alone from the President will not persuade the Leader that the US is serious this time. Getting directly to the Leader with an oral message (perhaps confirmed by a non-paper), delivered at a very senior level, is important to get through despite ~~around~~ the intense internal political struggles in Tehran over relations with the US – and over who will rule Iran.

The message to the Leader should declare that President Obama has designated his personal representative to conduct official discussions with a representative of the Supreme Leader. In a respectful tone the message should call for:

- The avoidance of misunderstandings in the Gulf, Afghanistan, Iraq or the Levant that would lead to conflict.
- Greater cooperation between these two important states – the US and Iran - in the Middle East.
- Mutual recognition of the other's legitimate interests in the area.
- The beginning, without preconditions, of discussions on cooperative steps on regional and global problems.
- Mutual recognition that both leaders of the US and Iran have stated publicly their desire for a world without nuclear weapons.
- An understanding that the Leader's fatwa against the building or use of nuclear weapons could establish an excellent basis for discussions with the aim of agreement for greater IAEA access to Iran's nuclear program to assure the world about Iran's nuclear intentions and develop an arrangement regarding enrichment.
- Finally, an understanding of what types of reciprocal actions might be undertaken by each side to demonstrate the seriousness of this new effort to work toward cooperation.

B. Getting this message directly to the Supreme Leader is a major hurdle. We offer several possible approaches:

- **First.** A senior US Government official, perhaps the Secretary of State, would make an oral presentation to the Iran's permanent representative to the UN, who is the senior Iranian official within reach and request that the message get directly to the Supreme Leader. This approach would have the advantage of not appearing to bypass President Ahmadinejad and provide an opportunity for the new Foreign Minister Salehi to become a player. It would have the disadvantage of throwing the message into the middle of Iran's political disorder and competitive environment where US relationships have become a touchstone...
- **Second.** A senior American, not a member of the administration, could deliver this message to a senior counterpart in Tehran. For example Senator Kerry might meet with Larijani the President of the Majlis. The advantage would be that it would enable the President to have deniability should this initial approach prove to be unproductive or be rejected. But the disadvantage is that it would bring in a key player who is a strong competitor to Ahmadinejad and perhaps not be seen as a serious US Presidential initiative...
- **Third.** A senior Envoy from the US or a Third Country could take this message directly to Ahmadinejad, who claims to be the strongest supporter of closer US/Iran contacts. The advantage of this approach would be to engage the second most important player in the Iranian government. The disadvantages are that it would enhance, at least temporarily, Ahmadinejad's stature in Iran's governing structure and open up even more open opposition within Iran's power elite.

- **Fourth.** A senior statesman from a third country who has direct access to the Supreme Leader could be asked to determine whether the Leader would respond favorably to President Obama's message. We have in mind someone like Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey, who is one of the few statesmen who probably has direct access to the Leader. There may well be others in that category such as Oman. The advantage of this approach is that Erdogan's stature as an Islamic leader friendly to Iran might make the message more credible to the Leader. Another advantage would be that the initial approach could be confidential and provide some deniability for the President should this approach sour or fail. The disadvantage would be the involvement of a third country national whose personal and national prestige would become engaged and raise the possibility that the President's message to the Leader might be distorted or misunderstood. The Iranians see Turkey in a competitive and possibly disdainful light based on a history with periods of confrontation and tension.

- C. Should the initial approach to the Supreme Leader prove successful in setting up initial discussions between designated envoys, one possible and ambitious route for the administration would be an agreement between President Obama and the Supreme Leader on a structure to manage the bilateral differences and promote the common interests.** Such an agreement would provide clear direction to each government on establishing a new tone and spirit in conducting relations. It would also set the agenda for cooperation on a wide range of bilateral problems.
- D. The administration would need to develop a public diplomatic strategy in advance of the first meeting of empowered representatives to explain the objectives to the**

Congress, to our allies and friends and to the American people.

Conclusion: We can give no assurances that any of these suggestions would work. We are convinced however that given the Iranian obsession about US regime change policies and the negative consequences for US interests of not changing the relationship, the US will have to take the lead in persuading the Supreme Leader and his advisers that the US generally seeks a new relationship.