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IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM:
IS A PEACEFUL SOLUTION POSSIBLE?

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. WITTES: Okay. Good morning, everyone, and thank you so much for joining us at the end of a holiday weekend.

We are here this morning to discuss an issue that is in the headlines just about daily, but that I think will continue to occupy a great deal of attention here in Washington and around the world in the coming year. There's been so much discussion about the desire of the U.S. electorate, as reflected in the vote last November, to reduce its engagement in foreign affairs broadly, to shy away from new entanglements, and also to turn its attention perhaps a bit more away from the Middle East and towards other parts of the world. And we've seen the intentions of the Administration in that regard.

But of course here in the Saban Center, we know that the Middle East doesn't wait quietly for the U.S. Administration to devote there. It tends to demand such attention. And I think on no issue is that more clear this year than on the issue of the brewing confrontation with Iran over its nuclear program.

There have been a number of recent developments on this topic that make it worthy of a renewed discussion. And I can't think of anyone I would rather have on our dais to help us think through the U.S. approach to this very challenging than Ambassador Tom Pickering.

MR. PICKERING: Thank you, Tamara. That's very nice. You don't always get that on a Tuesday morning.

(Laughter)

MS. WITTES: Tom is, among his many other accomplishments, a distinguished fellow in the Foreign Policy program here at Brookings, and we're delighted to have the opportunity to bring him here to the stage. He's also, of course, vice chairman of Hills & Company, an international consulting firm, and a retired U.S. diplomat

with a very distinguished record, including service in the Middle East, but also to major global powers, like Russia and India, who are playing a very interesting role in the evolving diplomacy over Iran. So, Tom, welcome.

MR. PICKERING: Thank you, Tamara.

MS. WITTES: And along with Tom, of course, we have our own Kenneth Pollack, Senior Fellow in the Saban Center. And Ken is finishing a book right now on the challenge of Iran, which you will be able to look for in bookstores later this year. So we're very happy to have Ken with us to provide some comments on this topic as well.

What we'll do is we'll have a little bit of a conversation up here, and then we'll open it up for questions from the floor. And why don't we jump right in with some of these recent developments?

There's now a date set for the next round of international negotiations to be held in Almaty, that distinguished capital. One wonders perhaps if that quieter location will allow a little bit of distance from the glare of the cameras. Do you expect much progress? What do you expect from these long-delayed, long-awaited talks in Almaty?

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: Thanks, Tamara, very much. It's a pleasure to be with you all. I can't think of a more wonderful crowd to bring in out of the rain for what has been the longest-running non-event, discussions in Iran in this town for some time.

I wish I could say I thought that Almaty would produce something. I live in fervent hope, but I think the reality is that it seems to me to be pretty unlikely at the moment. You have pending internal processes I think in Iran leading to the selection of a new president in the summer, and inauguration sometime in the autumn, and so that might well be a period of stasis. On the other hand, because you can get any point of

view from any Iranian you talk to, some are also talking about an opportunity, and we'll have to wait and see.

The rocket that shot up at Munich on bilateral conversations, launched by Vice President Biden, and seemingly supported by Foreign Minister Sulehi, at least for a few seconds, fell on unfertile ground somewhere. And that doesn't look like it's a good omen of good things to come.

There are opportunities in Almaty. My own sense is that all of the talk about a grand bargain is probably a massive amount of overreach given the extent of mistrust and misunderstanding. But this is typical diplomatic thinking, and it could be overturned. But we see very little signs of what one might call a kind of miraculous Henry Kissinger secret trip to Beijing in the offing here. You know, one could stand that kind of surprise, but I don't think that's in the offing.

I think that the other side of the equation is something very small could come out that might even help to strengthen the mistrust that is so severe. The supreme leader on one hand seems to be saying it's perfectly okay to talk about P5+1, but sitting down separately with the devil is not yet in the cards. The devil somehow has to change his outlook on life. And as we all know, pre-conditions are not a very good way to set the stage for moving towards something successful, although these pre-conditions seems to be separated and isolated apparently from the bigger set of talks.

The problem with the bigger set of talks is probably at the moment too many moving parts, too many people in the room, too much difficulty in getting even a kind of inter-allied point of view on the table in a way that might even be encouraging to the supreme leader as opposed to the other way around. So I would say chances are very small, but I'd be very happy and very grateful to be surprised.

The small chances, in my view, have more to do with the possibility of a

small agreement. Even a minor one I think would help. And so one could say that the best expectations at the moment are that they will set another date and even another place, and that in itself will be encouraging because we all know that the rounds of negotiations that took place before 2012 always ended in one day with pretty much wide disagreement, and with the task of the negotiators to spend the next year figuring out where and when to meet again. And if we could get over the procedural hurdle, that would be some small, but not very gratifying, dividend.

MS. WITTES: Tom, as you look at how the United States has prepared the ground for this set of talks, you noted that the notion of bilateral talks fell on unfertile ground. Of course, one reason that that trial balloon was put forward is because there were those arguing that that's what the Iranians really need to feel reassured. They need the direct engagement with the United States and to probe on whether the U.S. is truly interested in a deal or is really just interested in changing the regime in Tehran. And they need the reassurance that direct bilateral talks could provide.

Do you think that the Obama Administration has constructed an approach that responds to Iranian concerns, and that can solicit a meaningful response?

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: I think they tried hard, in all honesty. And I think they tried any number of times to reach out. And it's hard to see how one could overcome this, except perhaps for some actions that we might take that would be demonstrably difficult for U.S. domestic relationships, and indeed for a process as a significant down payment without any sense of return. So I find that particularly hard.

I think that the Iranians, in their own view, have reason at least to argue that we're not serious and all we want to do is remove their regime. I mean, we have reasonable reason to argue on our side that they're not serious and all they want to do is go into a giant schlep until, in fact, they're ready to make a nuclear weapon and

presumably decide to do and go ahead very quickly, and see if they can slip that past the goal post. I think that's a very stupid thing to be thinking about.

And as Ken reminded me this morning, there was reiteration of the fatwa over the weekend with the challenge that if we really wanted to do it, Ken, we could do it, nobody can stop us. But that's not what we want to do.

MS. WITTES: The fatwa against nuclear weapons.

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: The fatwa against nuclear. There are a lot of fatwas, but I don't pay attention to those other ones.

And to some extent, interesting enough, a year ago Secretary Clinton said we ought to sit down and see if we can make the fatwa into a prevailing reality, and I think that that's an important part of the approach.

MS. WITTES: What would that look like?

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: Well, I mean, it would look like the kind of agreement that many people have written and thought about. In my view, essentially four points at the end game would be very important to establish and to swallow on both sides.

One would be basically accepting the fatwa, but making it a reality by building into the Iranian civil program what I would call significant, even slavish, adherence to civil objectives so that, in fact, you would have some idea in quantity and quality how much enriched uranium they really thought they needed and we could agree with either to fuel the TRR, the 20 percent using reactor, or to provide the only logical reason why they would need fuel is in case the Russians renege on Bashir.

They have nothing else. They have a 20-reactor plan. It was the Shah's 20-reactor plan. But we don't see any money being put into any new reactor build or any contracts led or anything moving. So that part is fairly chimerical.

And I hope the supreme leader understands what our doubts are about a program that is zooming ahead, producing a lot of low enriched uranium with no ostensible purpose other than perhaps legitimately to guard against Russian malfeasance. But that in itself would be subject to quantitative limitations.

So first, we need to build into an Iranian program something that provides us the best of all possible guarantees against breakout. Secondly, I believe that the IAEA ought to be commissioned to say what do they need to inspect that program. Certainly the additional protocol, but I don't think the additional protocol is the end of all inspection technology. We've had experience with Iraq. They have developed new technologies. There's going on. Ask the IAEA what it is they need. The Iranians keep coming to us and saying, we only want a civil program, and we're perfectly happy to have the IAEA inspected fully.

On our side, obviously two things have to happen I think at the end of the day. One is, those sanctions related to the nuclear program should come off gradually as the kind of program I've talked about on the Iranian side gets implemented. And secondly, we would accept, but it would be de facto in accepting a limited civilian program they're right to enrich, which they keep saying they want to have -- put on the table. But the two go together in some ways.

That kind of spell out at the end of the day would seem to be possible. Getting there is a much harder problem. I believe it has to go by steps and stages. You have to be sure, in fact, that it's going to work, even if you can sit down and describe what might be. And I might -- you know, I may not have all the ideas, but those, in my view, seem to be the central ideas that you should have on the table.

And the way to proceed is any number of choices about significant steps that they would move to lock in their civil program, and we would move to take sanctions

away.

MS. WITTES: You know, I can't help but feel the more we talk about this issue and what a deal could look like, that the Iranian nuclear issue is becoming like the Israeli-Palestinian issue where we all say we know what the deal looks like. It's just a question of whether and how we can get there.

Ken, do you think it's possible, taking the incremental approach that Tom is talking about here, to get to that kind of deal?

MR. POLLACK: Yeah. I think you're focusing on exactly the right thing. And to kind of build on some of the points that Tom, I think, has very cogently made, I think is actually a moment as we're kind of thinking about re-engaging with the Iranians to start to think a little big picture.

I agree completely with Tom. I don't see breakthroughs coming out of Almaty. I think that it's a moment when we need to put down some very important markers to the Iranians. I agree with Tom. I think that we need to say to the Iranians we are serious about a deal, and we truly would be willing to lift the sanctions. And I'd go beyond that. I'd like to see the United States saying we're willing to provide even more meaningful benefits to the Iranians in return for their willingness to make the kind of compromises that we need from them, exactly along the lines of what Tom is suggesting.

But I think what you're getting at points to some bigger picture issues. On the Iranian side, again as Tom has already suggested, I think the Iranians need to ask themselves whether they are willing to strike a deal and live by it. I agree with Tom. I think the Iranians have been hinting broadly at it. I think that the Iranians have kind of put out there the fact that they would be willing to stop at the 19.75 level of enrichment, and they would be willing to accept at least the additional protocol, maybe going beyond that. And I think that, you know, you can kind of broadly see the outlines of that deal, and I

think that the United States for its parts has kind of sort of hinted at that as well.

But I think on our side we've also got a lot of work to do. And I think in particular while it's certainly the case that the incremental approach that Tom has laid out I think can get us there. It's only going to get us there if the United States, and that means the whole U.S. government, is actually willing to accept the end state, okay? And the end state is going to be an Iran that is limited, that is bound by inspections, backed by the threat of renewed sanctions, but ultimately is going to have some enrichment capability.

And one of the things that I worry about is whether the U.S. government, the whole U.S. government, is going to be willing to actually live with that.

MS. WITTES: And by that, you mean within the executive branch, or are you referring to Congress?

MR. POLLACK: I think certainly within the Congress, but I think there is some within the executive branch as well. And, you know, I think that we're going to have to sit down and say can we live this, because if we keep saying no to the Iranians are not allowed to have any enrichment capability, I see it as making perfect the enemy of good enough. And unfortunately it is a perfect solution that I do not think we will ever achieve.

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: Well, Ken, you know, I totally agree, and Bill Luers, and Jim Walsh, and I wrote a piece 4 years ago, but we were only following on other people who had been writing pieces. And so it seems to me that you have to crack through this barrier.

I can remember in 1994 writing a cable from Moscow after I had spent weeks beating the hell out of the Russians on no nuclear program in Iran and you got to be with us. And they said, why? They're NPT members. They haven't done anything

wrong. And, you know, in the end we could sell a reactor here. This is good stuff for us. They were very poor.

So I went back to Washington and I said, maybe it's time for us, rather than to do the right thing two years too late, go after an Iranian program, make sure they do not get into sensitive facilities, enrichment and re-processing. I never got an answer to that cable, one of the many that I never got an answer to, but that's okay.

(Laughter)

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: You know, we live with that --

MS. WITTES: Such is the fate of ambassadors.

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: But the notion is that we have essentially been right about how to deal with the Iranian program, but usually four years too late when they've already had what it is they want, and we're coming back and asking for roll back. So I think that's right.

And I think that, look, no enrichment is splendid if you could get it, but I don't think you're going to get it. But I think you can get limitations and firewall them with the IAEA, and that's probably the best you're going to be able to get. But just diddling around means, in fact, that their present effort, which I think is sincerely where they want to go. They keep talking about being like Japan, having in hand all of the technologies that are necessary to go should they decide to go, is something that we need to take into account.

Now I think they're there or practically there, and we can argue about a little bit of this and a little bit of that. I would like to see the amount of enriched material bears some real relationship to a civil program and its needs, which, in my view, would put it below the danger point rather than above the danger point that they have a whole lot of it, and they can move very quickly, and it'll be done deep underground, and we

have all of those concerns.

And we keep hearing from them that's what they want to do, but we can't seem to get out of what I would call the low gear of four or five years ago where we were totally convinced that the lowest common denominator of Western opinion had to be no enrichment.

And I suspect that we're still there because there are enough people who are out there, and the President and others aren't willing to break the tie, although I have to admire Secretary Clinton. As you remember, she said about a year ago that she felt it would be possible to get toward a program where there was some enrichment, but it had to be bound, or at least there was a hint in that direction. And I think she was putting on the table what it is that you're talking about, but we haven't done it concretely enough. And to some extent, a proposal that was either inherently or explicitly in that direction, and I laid out for you what my instinct goals would be. If we could lay out instinct goals, we would hopefully get over that hurdle.

I would, because I think it's very important, like to see us engaged us in negotiations for two reasons. One, because I want them to succeed, but two, if they're going to fail, I want to know sooner rather than later.

MS. WITTES: Can I just probe for a minute on the international dimensions here, and particularly as it relates to the question of enrichment and the question of sanctions. Because you both seem to emphasize the idea that getting the Iranians where we would be comfortable with them being on enrichment means putting forward the real prospect of sanctions, relief, and, Ken, even more carrots potentially than that.

These sanctions were so painstakingly constructed, and they are in their implementation and enforcement so carefully balanced. The U.S. and others have sub

costs here. Is it possible to wield this lever with that kind of fine control given how difficult it's been to put this package together?

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: Let me just try to -- I wanted to intrude a word from my sponsor because this happens to be a book on the costs and benefits of military action against Iran, which a small group of us put together, got a lot of signers to comment and help us improve and change it. That came out in the summer. And then in December we did a similar one, the costs and benefits of sanctions, and we attempted to try to avoid recommendations and tried to let the book for itself. It's an unusual book in Washington.

But the notion in the sanctions book was very clearly that the sanctions have been in place, some of them, 30 years. They involve things other than nuclear: deep concerns over support for terrorist groups, deep concerns over the treatment of their own citizens in human rights terms and so on. So there are multiple purposes.

They come in multiple ways. Some of them have been done through the UN Security Council, and indeed, as you know, Ken, you and I are speaking heresy because the Security Council resolution says no enrichment, you know. Happily having worked on the Security Council, they can pass another resolution support any agreement we could reach and deal with that particular case. Like the British Parliament, there are no rules about revising your position in the Security Council.

The third thing is our domestic sanctions implemented by legislation, and some by regulation under the legislation, and then we have EU sanctions, and indeed sanctions that other people follow that are mandated by the Security Council. The EU seems to be on this issue potentially more flexible than we are, and so there is operating room there.

There is operating room in not putting more sanctions on that could be

helpful as an initial step, and obviously that would be important. Each one of these the President would have to explain that he's getting value, that the Europeans could take sanctions of central banks and petroleum, for example, that we could do things that I think are absolutely necessary.

We have had a longstanding policy of not sanctioning food and medicine for good reasons, and when I was on the Security Council and we did the first sanctions on Iraq after their invasion of Kuwait, we made it scrupulously careful. That got all screwed up in oil for food, and I don't want to spend time here talking about that. But that was a perfect example of how things could go wrong.

But the fundamental basis was the right basis, that even in the worst of all possible situations; you don't punish the population particularly for the sins of their leaders, particularly if they don't choose the leaders. But we have now got a situation where we have browbeaten the banking community to the point where they are deeply concerned even about allowing finance for food and medicine privileges, if the Iranians were prepared to do that, and they have been doing that, to let that go through. So we, in fact, have given licenses over at OFAC and Treasury for food and medicine sales, but we have created an effective barrier to actually seeing any of that come to consummation. And we should very clearly find some banks we trust in Iran who are prepared to finance that -- we have to find more than one because we don't want to throw all the business in one place -- and say we're prepared to license you banks to do the food and medicine purchases. We get over this hurdle. We could put that on the table.

I for a long time have thought that while it was important for us politically to punish Iran by keeping it out of the energy business with Pakistan and India, at some point early in the game, the permission for that pipeline would be extremely important. Why? Because two firm, important, not necessarily totally agreed U.S. allies are

prepared to open an energy window, not the only one. But I am convinced that good pipelines make reasonably good neighbors.

And to some extent, this would, in my view, bring stability to South Asia rather than instability. And while Iran might benefit a little bit, I think there are multiple benefits for us to realize we're the shooting ourselves in our own foot mode. So that could come.

So there are a lot of things that one could do creatively here in the early stages, and that would be the testing time. Once things work, I think it's going to be easier to convince people to take them off. But, look, I'm a realist. Look how long it took to take sanctions off Russia, even though they weren't implemented, over Jewish immigration. And look how long it has taken us in some other venues to take them off Iraq. Even after we invaded the country and created the government, we still had theoretically sanctions against Iraq for a long period of time.

So the Congress doesn't move with the speed of light. There are a lot of doubters there. That would take a hard effort. But it's the reason why I think we should move.

One final point on Ken's very important piece that I totally agree with. There is the question of what to do beyond nuclear. And to some extent, the complexities are large, but we, in my view, should not close the window in any serious way to dealing with other questions on the agenda, provided obviously nuclear gets a hearing and its part, in part because there may be things that we could do which are the equivalent of taking off sanctions and benefits in other areas that could be helpful that would be a positive offset, even if you couldn't pull the sanctions off that could help you make a nuclear deal work and vice versa. So I wouldn't do that.

I would not, however, go in with a table with every issue littered with

confusing ideas and with all kinds of things. But if the Iranians are prepared and interested, then we ought to take a look at it and see how we can get it, because over a period of time, finding a way slightly to expand the envelope and include other benefits in a negotiation as difficult as this one is an option that we have, and we shouldn't lose sight of it. It's what one would call the non-sanction sanction positive effort that could complement this.

And I thought you were heading there, and you almost were. But let me just take it, because I think you and I agree on this. Yeah.

MR. POLLACK: Absolutely.

MS. WITTES: You know, I think there's an issue here as we talk about expanding the arena for negotiations so that one can find other incentives to bring to the process. We have to look at Iran in the region and the U.S. in the region. And the way these other regional dynamics -- the turmoil of the Arab awakening and particularly the conflict in Syria -- is shaping the environment within which these talks will take place.

I wonder, Ken, if you can speak to that a little bit from an Iranian perspective and from an American perspective. How do these regional developments play? Are these things that could be leveraged for one side or the other in a negotiation?

MR. POLLACK: I think potentially both sides can imagine that they would be. I think the reality is that they really can't. These regional events are taking place largely based on dynamics of their own, and our ability, Iran's ability, to shape what's happening in Syria, what's happening in Egypt, what's happening in Yemen or Bahrain, is extremely limited. I think that there is a strong temptation on both of our parts to try to do so or to claim, and I think that's particularly the case on the Iranian part.

But I think that the reality is that we all know that these countries are being driven by forces internal and inherent to themselves. And I actually think that it's

one of these -- and it goes back to a point that I think Tom was making earlier on, which is that what's going on in the region actually ought to give both us more of an incentive to actually come to an agreement.

What concerns me is that if we're not able to reach an agreement, it's going to drive us to a place that's going to be actually much harder for both Iranians and Americans. On the American side, the choice has become fairly obvious, which is if we don't get a deal with Iran that we're comfortable with, that they can live with as well, we're going to face the worst choice of all, the choice between going to war with Iran or living with a nuclear Iran.

I have my preference between those two options, but both of them are terrible options. And the truth is that the greatest incentive for actually coming to this kind of an agreement is so that we don't have to face that. And my fear is that the -- kind of the very incremental -- not the incremental approach, but the incremental thinking of I don't like this concession, I don't like that concession, is going to drive us to that ultimate choice. That is my great fear.

On the Iranian side as well, I think they, too, will have some terrible choices to make. Do they go ahead and recognize and say basically to hell with the entire world, we want these weapons, and we're willing to pay the price? And for them, that price might mean becoming North Korea, which is actually something I don't think that the Iranians want to become, a state that has nothing going for it but its nuclear arsenal. Or the alternative, of course, is going to be making some very significant concessions that they don't seem to want to make.

So for both of us, if we're not willing to make that deal, it drives us to make choices that ultimately are awful, much worse than what we could right now. And I think at the end of the day, what's going on, the turmoil in the region simply contributes to

those points.

You know, when you think about either living with a nuclear Iran or going to war with Iran in the context of the turmoil of the region, those choices are always terrible. They're much worse in the current context, for the Iranians as well. Given the turmoil in the region, given what is going on, the choice between nuclearizing and becoming North Korea or making these kind of concessions that they don't want to make also even more awful than they would be even under other circumstances.

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: Well, let me just make two comments, Ken. I think that obviously -- we haven't talked extensively about it, and I agree with you on the military option. On the other hand, it's not off the table. So it might be North Korea on what is the negative of steroids. I don't know. The Iranians do not have massive artillery zeroed on some nearby friendly city. We need to take that into account.

On the other hand, I totally agree with you that the Iranians have a long tradition and a great interest, and they want to be a power in the region. And one of the questions we have to resolve, while we can't dictate it, is what our role in the region will be in the future, what their role, what our Arab friends' role will be, and where it will go.

In the best of all possible worlds, and this is walking hand-in-hand into the sunset at the end of the fourth reel of the Hollywood movie, and everything is splendid, you could even think of a regional organization that could contain both. But, I mean, that's pretty far down the road.

The second question is that while it would be nice to say there is going to be a line in our discussions with Iran, if they ever get engaged, if we get into any kind of gear, between the regional developments and the Iranian bilateral issue number one -- nuclear, but perhaps others -- I think it's going to be hard to do that if the Iranians themselves think there is traction to be gained in dealing with the process.

And so one of our problems is not being able to expand the nuclear question. The other problem is if we expand it, do we get into this massive too many moving parts situation? And does that, in fact, lead to a set of negotiations which are engaged, but inconclusive, as opposed to finding another alternative to not being engaged at all, and we face that dilemma.

I'd rather frankly start by being engaged. I would rather start small than big. I think it's important, however, to be open to reasonable add-ons, but to guard against having, in fact, everything have to be discussed before anything can be agreed. And those are the tasks of diplomats once they engage in the process.

And to some extent, one of the things you can do as a diplomat is make clear to the other side very early on how you will judge negotiations. Another question you have to resolve is the fundamentals. We totally distrust their commitment on not making a nuclear weapon. They totally distrust the myriad numbers of times we have said we are not interested in regime change.

There are things that we could do, including, for example, either being willing to discuss any single event that they interpret as regime change, or set up a hotline, or begin in some ways to take a set of actions, maybe not with respect to the nuclear program, but maybe, as alleged, with respect to other activities that would ease their mind a little bit and tell them we're prepared to do this as a way of conditioning the negotiations. But how about on your side, a few things on your side that would make some sense?

Finally on Syria, I couldn't agree more that trying to solve Syria in parallel with the Iranian nuclear program, and why not throw in Arab-Israeli peace to begin with, is such a horrendous mountain to cross and such a difficult set of problems, that I don't think anybody, except in their worst nightmare, would postulate that kind of scenario. But

it is true that Iran has equities and assets in the Assad regime. Apparently they have not yet concluded that the Assad regime has something of a half-life, whatever it might be.

To some extent, I believe that one of the things we can do less for Iran but maybe for Russia, which seems to be at least aware of the fact that may have -- that Assad may have a short half-life is beginning to move over on the other side of the fence with Lak Ibrihim and what he's trying to do. My own view is that we need on our side -- this is not a popular view -- but to join Mr. Khatib, who began to drop pre-conditions to negotiation and drop them all.

There is no good negotiation, in my view, that can start with one side requiring that the other give up its primary preoccupation as a price of the process of beginning to negotiate. And I think that's unrealistic, and I don't know why we jumped on it in the first place, except it may have been seen as the one element necessary to keep the Syrian opposition together even while we tried to move in the other direction. But now that Mr. Khatib has made this point of view, we have something of an open door.

I would very early like to see, and I don't think the Iranians would support it, but they may not object to, a humanitarian cease fire based on a commitment to negotiations. I also have my own doubts as to whether a transitional government makes so much sense, and whether we ought not to try to move to elections. That Syrian election commission and a UN election commission, a very robust one, given four months to have an election, might be a better way, because we could argue for a year and a half about a transitional government, and then we would argue about elections.

But even after elections, I recognize you've got to look at the Annan plan some place in this mix. And to some extent, that is facilitated, in my view, by elections, but not resolved. So these elements, in my view, seem important.

I don't think you could get Iran on our side on those issues. I think you

could possibly get the Russians and the Chinese. I think it's worth looking at. And it's a different approach, but it involves all the elements that are out there, and it is going to be a very hard approach because nobody for a while will sit still for a cease fire. And how to deal with that is a very hard question. But it seems to me worth looking at.

And Iran is there, and if you could find a way, maybe with Russian and Chinese pressure, to begin to diffuse some of their ability to throw hand grenades into the midst of this thing, it would be helpful, but I don't hold out a lot of hope. But I think that's a different track and a different way of proceeding.

MS. WITTES: You know, it's a very interesting set of points, and that was such a thorough proposal that I think you need to worry now about a call from the Secretary General. But if we would look to Iran softening its approach to the Syrian conflict as something it could do to reassure the U.S. and the international community, we also -- it seems to be another clear implication of what you're saying is that if the U.S. takes further steps to support the Syrian opposition, that will be read by the Iranians as strengthening their view that we're out to get them. There are those here --

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: If we're out to get Assad, are we ipso facto out to get Iran, or are we going to, in effect, offer them an opportunity, whatever that might be worth -- it's probably worth very little -- protect the Alawites, which is something I think we need to despite the fact they have a bad record, but everybody in Syria doesn't have a sterling record. But I think we also need to give them an opportunity to say, okay, there's a new Syria forming. Do they want to be engaged or not engaged? And, you know, what are the relationships there?

I think that's all very hard stuff. As I said, I'm not very optimistic that you could get the Iranians on board, but maybe you could find a way to help make them increasingly less relevant, and that in itself would have its own view.

Now do the Iranians that with regime change? Maybe. We have to be aware of that. I think that's a stretch. But I think the Iranians could see what I would call increasing value in the opportunity to talk if, in fact, they begin to understand that the region is not all moving totally in their direction all of the time, which I think indeed is the case.

MS. WITTES: It's a particularly challenge of course given our domestic politics and the fact that there are those in our own system arguing for great support for the Syrian rebels because they believe it would weaken Iran. So a complicated picture.

Why don't we open it up at this point for questions from the audience? We've got a lot of folks in the room. I'm going to try to get to as many of you as I can.

Two rules that are fundamental to questions at Brookings events: number one, please identify yourself before you ask your question, and number two, make it, A -- that's singular -- a question, which means it has a question mark at the end.

And why don't we start with Barbara Slavin here in the second row?

MS. SLAVIN: Thanks. Barbara Slavin from the Atlantic Council. A question to both our distinguished speakers. What is it going to take to get the Iranians, specifically Ayatollah Khamenei, supreme leader, to agree to one-on-one talks? Is there some magic formula?

I mean, if you read his recent remarks, he doesn't really rule it out. He conditions that he hedges that the United States has to be logical, has to show respect, et cetera. Is there some magic solution to overcome this, or are we just going to have to wait until Iranian presidential elections for a better offer to be put on the table? Thanks.

MS. WITTES: Thank you.

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: Why don't you try, Ken?

(Laughter)

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: Barbara is always very good.

MR. POLLACK: Yeah, exactly. It's a great question. Let me answer it this way. First, I will answer your specific question. I always have this line that I like to use that if you want to be an Iran expert, it's actually very easy because you only need to know two phrases -- "I don't know," and "It depends" -- because that's the answer to 99 percent of the questions you'll ever be asked.

And this is one where I don't think we know what's in Khamenei's head, and I don't think that we know if it is even possible, whether if theoretically he has some threshold which if we crossed, he would be willing to do it. I just don't know. It may be that there is no threshold, or it may be that the threshold exists, but it is not realistic for us to ever cross that. And so again, that would realistically make it impossible.

What I think is more important, though, is in my mind, I'm not convinced that the direct bilateral negotiations are necessary, okay? I think that there are a variety of different ways to skin this cat, and I don't think that we should make the modalities the be all and end all. I don't think that we should get into arguments over the size and the shape of the table.

If the Iranians are comfortable in the P5+1 setting, I'm comfortable in the P5+1 setting. If they would like to move beyond it to bilateral negotiations, I'm comfortable with that, too. But my feeling is it is going to be hard enough to get, as Tom was pointing out, to get an agreement that we can both agree on, and to make the negotiations fruitful and have them proceed to the point where we can get that agreement.

And so I wouldn't want to say, look, we have to have the bilateral to make this work or we can't have the bilateral to make this work. By the same token, I wouldn't say it has to be a grand bargain or it has to be just about the nuclear issue. I

think we need to show flexibility. And again, for me, this is why that focus on that end state, on thinking big picture, is so important because we have to have in our mind what is it that we want, what is it that we are willing to accept, and also, of course, what is unacceptable to us, okay?

And I'm willing to pursue a whole variety of paths as long as they get us to that end state. And the paths that we take are much less interesting to me than getting to that end state, because that end state is going to be hard enough.

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: Just maybe one or two other points. I think Ken has done a superb job, and certainly not much I can do to polish it up. My feeling is he's entirely right, that we ought not to let process be the sole determinant.

On the other hand, the process on the other side, the P5+ 1, is, in the view of many, not very good. And it has problems of personality. It has problems of internal differences, as Ken pointed out early on, which are only reflected in the USG, but maybe easier to resolve in the USG than they are in the P5+1 at the moment. But I think that can be done.

Secondly, I think we have to stick with what we have got and try to make the best use of it and see where we can go. The notion that the bilaterals are going to be millennial I think is wrong. I think they are necessary, but probably not sufficient in the end. And even at the end of very successful bilaterals, you'd want to go back to the P5+1, and then maybe to the Security Council for some ratification and reinforcement process, because they're all engaged in this. And I think that that's important.

But I think we ought to be open-minded about the scope of negotiations. I think we should be single-minded about a determination to keep the negotiating process going, even if it involves a few extra hours in Almaty to try to set another time and other place if we can, or a commitment, if you can't get the other, that we will come together

again fairly soon and move it ahead.

We have to respect internal Iranian processes, however much we may disparage them. And if they want to have a new president in place before they undertake difficult negotiations, and that's a significant sign that maybe if that process is passed we could get on a little further, okay, we've got to accept that. I don't think the time is pushing us as rapidly as that. I certainly hope it's not. I think it's a good sign that the Iranians continue to convert 20 percent material to metallic powder as opposed to keeping it gaseous form, and that's minor technical stuff that can be reversed. But it gives us a little extra window of time, and I'm not a physicist, so I can't tell you how much. But at least I'm persuaded it gives you a little bit of extra time, and that's helpful.

So I think that time, openness, Ken's principles, are all right in trying to deal with this. And we ought to try to manage process to suit our needs, but that ought not to become the end all and be all of the problem. It's a little bit like, if I could take a shot, at the Turkey-Brazil deal where the process of getting sanctions seem to be much more important than the process of getting even a preliminary agreement on what to do about some of Iranians LEU. And I think that was too bad. I think that was a missed opportunity.

MS. WITTES: Tom, you raised the issue of calendars and schedule. And I think it might be useful for this audience to talk a little bit about what the window time wise for diplomacy looks like this year, because certainly if we look at what we knew or what we think we know about rates of enrichment, there were a lot of people saying that by the summer, Iran would be at a dangerous point in terms of how much -- more highly enriched uranium it had acquired. And of course you noted that the presidential transition will not be over until the fall.

So do we need to worry about some of these international actors

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creating too much pressure on the process? Is there a window that's fairly narrow? Or beyond Iranian unilateral decisions to convert uranium to powder form, are there other ways to keep that window open?

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: That's a very interesting question. First, if I were prime minister of Israel, I suspect I'd want to deal as soon as I could, and I'd want the U.S. to attack if I couldn't get a deal that was satisfactory as rapidly as possible. And I would want to stay as far out of it as I could. But I think that that's a moving set of timelines.

My own sense is that the more low enriched uranium they have and the more 20 percent they have, the more we have the right be concerned because it provides for a larger, more rapid breakout possibility. On the other hand, I don't know. It's like plumbing the Supreme Leader's mind on what red lines we have to cross to disabuse them of the regime change idea. I don't know the answer to that particular question.

I can see four separate pieces of time somehow bounded by the uncertainties of when we get to a critical amount of material. My own view is the much more critical question is if they take steps that indicate they're moving beyond 20 percent. And since this is all happily under IAEA supervision, I wouldn't mind slightly strengthening that.

But I would also be very worried if the IAEA began to see in Fordal or elsewhere with older new centrifuges more material coming off about 20 percent. I would be very worried if they dismissed the IAEA. I'd be even more worried if they decided to get out of the treaty a la North Korea.

Within the timelines that are interior Iranian politics, I suppose the run up to the election, the time when they reveal which candidates are in and which candidates are out. I guess it's the Guardian Council, but I always get this screwed up because

there are so many councils that I can't keep track of them.

The second is during the electoral period, which I think will be a harder period, if they are aware of internal politics, it'll be tougher. Then the period after the election and before the inauguration, some argue might prevent a window because there is, in effect, no president or a de facto president. And then after the new president is in, on the other hand, we have seen over the last two years what I would call the very clear, not complete, but very clear growing paramountcy of the supreme leader and his decisions, even with respect to Ahmadinejad. And, in fact, I think that Ahmadinejad has been a powerful force in driving the Supreme Leader in that direction unfortunately or fortunately, depending on how you want to see kind of the uni-personal government operating in Iran.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Okay, we'll take a few more down in front. If we can get the mic down in front here in the first row, and then we'll go to the third row.

MR. MITCHELL: Thanks very much. I'm Garrett Mitchell, and I write the *Mitchell Report*. And I want to follow on a comment that Tamara made at the opening of the session about how this has sort of -- it may not rhyme, but it sort of echoes the Israeli-Palestinian situation.

From my standpoint, it does that because in the final analysis, it's not clear to me that there's anyone who can do a deal on the Iranian side who's willing to do a deal. Is the Ayatollah Khamenei Arafat on steroids?

And related to that, when we talk about doing a deal with Iranians, do we kid ourselves by making that a plural?

MS. WITTES: Right. So who is our interlocutor, and are they Arafat?

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: You know, the search for an interlocutor begins and ends with who the Iranians put forward. That's what you're stuck with unless

you have more mighty powers to operate inside Iran than I can foresee.

And so picking your negotiator on the other side has always been a very nice thought, and indeed has informed governments from time to time who believed that one way or another they could very cleverly maneuver that. I don't think that's proved to be very useful.

I think the second question is: you've got to live with the government on the other side of the table that you've got. If you feel in the end that that government will make a deal it cannot deliver, you've got to be careful about that. On the other hand, if they can make a deal with you that you want, then you'll have to decide between those two very stark alternatives what you're prepared to accept.

I never saw a government come to the negotiating table and make a deal with the other side that in the end it turned down because it didn't think the other side could deliver. It has always carried itself through to that next stage of making things happen.

So I think we're stuck with that kind of a format and with that set of arrangements.

MR. MITCHELL: What I was really driving at is something that comes out of Ken's -- that small volume that Ken wrote nine years ago called *The Persian Puzzle*, in which he said that, I think, that he determined that there is absolutely no interest in Iran having a relationship of any sort with the United States. That may be overstating it.

So it's interesting who's around the table, but in the final analysis, the only guy who can say yes or no is the Ayatollah, and he's not apt to say yes. That's what I meant by the question.

MS. WITTES: Okay. Ken, do you want to talk about that?

MR. POLLACK: I'll go back to the point that Tom made, which is, you know, I completely agree, which is that I think it's important to have the negotiations both because they may work, and if they do that would be excellent, and because even if they don't work, they tell us a great deal about the situation that we're in.

I continue to be very skeptical that Ayatollah Khamenei actually wants a real relationship with us, and that goes back to my answer to Barbara's question. I'm not convinced that that is necessary to getting a deal. You know, he doesn't have to like us to recognize that it is in his interests to begin to roll back the sanctions and begin to have a better relationship with the rest of the world, if not with us. And if he's willing to do what we need him to do, and it's basically the deal or some version of a deal that Tom and I have been outlining, I'm perfectly content to live with that.

And in terms of, you know, whether they will live up to that, my sense of the Iranians is that they're not going to agree to something if they're not actually willing to go ahead with it. They don't seem to be the North Koreans, who will make a deal and then immediately renege on it.

I'm struck by the fact that for whatever reason, the Iranians continue to just stiff the IAEA as opposed to the North Koreans, who I think would've told the IAEA whatever the heck they wanted to, and then the moment they left, gone and did what they wanted to do. That says to me something different about the Iranians.

And at the end of the day, the last piece of it that I think is really critical, which Tom and I have both focused on, is the fact that what has to happen for this deal to work for us is very extensive, very intrusive monitoring and inspections. And we will see. If the Iranians are not willing to go along with that, the deal comes apart immediately. If they are, then that tells us that they are willing to abide by the deal.

So I think it's one of these where we actually don't have to trust the

Iranians to do the right thing. This is going to go way beyond what we agreed to with the North Koreans.

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: Can I make just three quick points? That we have a lot of pressure on them to get a deal. That's not without its own effect. We know, in fact, the drinking poison statement at the end of the Iraq-Iran War.

Secondly, they don't have to become our best friends as a result of a deal. Obviously that's a more difficult problem as the question goes ahead, but it's something I think that we don't have to count on, and in many ways that would be nice, but I don't think that that's necessarily the way in which things have to develop.

I think that those two pieces are important here. The third is that we have had deals in the past, I think more or less stuck with. So, in fact, there have been occasions under which despite Ken's conclusion, but I don't necessarily support, but I have to read his book again to be sure that I'm correct in my non-supportivist ideas, that this is not something that is so completely strange.

And finally, the point about North Korea and Iran is interesting. The comparison to the Arab-Israeli question is interesting. The major point of the comparison is we all know what the deal can look like, and we all believe since we're not Iranians that it's a perfectly splendid deal because it's kind of win-win for both sides.

And secondly, we all believe it's the personalities, and their differences, and their internal arguments and their internal concerns that keep them from making the deal at the table.

But the third point I think is interesting one. I sometimes make the point that there is a third issue about the Arab-Israeli peace process. The only thing that is harder than getting an agreement the Arabs and the Israelis is to figure out way for the process to go away completely and finally, and never to return.

MS. WITTES: A very good point. Okay, I think what we'll do since there are a lot of hands up still is we'll take a couple of questions at a time, and then we'll come back up. And let's start right here.

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: And we can even dodge the hard ones.

MS. WITTES: Yeah. And then please, please do keep your questions as brief as you can so we can get to as many people as possible. Go ahead.

SPEAKER: I'm (inaudible). Mr. Pollack, you talked about Iranians need to trust the U.S. that the U.S. is not going to overthrow or help overthrow the Iranian government. But delisting MEK and also holding meetings with the leadership of MEK and the Congress -- and members of the Congress meeting with them recently and talking about overthrowing the regime, would that convince the Iranian regime that this is going to be to their benefit or not, especially in this period of time. Thank you.

MS. WITTES: Okay. So again, how does our own divided government affect the equation? Let's go right here.

SPEAKER: Thank you. I'm (inaudible), the Secretary General of (inaudible). In my dealing with Iranians, I think that the thing we should learn most is that they care about matter of principles. So if you want to have a deal, you have to acknowledge their rights. And the acknowledgment of their rights meaning since they're a member of the NPT, being able to do whatever is admitted by the NPT.

So I would claim that if you want to have a deal, you have to acknowledge at the beginning that they have the right to enrich. Then my understanding is that lots of things can happen. The last thing they want in Iran --

MS. WITTES: Just hold that close to your mouth.

SPEAKER: Just a second. I'm sorry. The last thing (inaudible) interesting in Iran was we are ready to suspend enrichment for one hour, meaning there

is a possibility of mediation. But you have to give them the rights that are acknowledged by the MPT.

I would like to ask the question to, I think that, first of all, what can you do here in the U.S. to promote this idea that somehow you have to acknowledge their rights? And this can be perceived as a defeat, and ideologically (inaudible), but I think it is a necessary defeat.

And then the point is that how can you in a sense readdress the issue of the sanction in a way which is progressive step by step? I think if you do this, then the issue of regime change will be, in a sense, secondary. They would proof, visible proof, that the authority is respected. And then this will induce the idea that regime change is not such a top priority. So I would say that quite a bit (inaudible) Americans, how can you make the political system here to acknowledge their -- formerly their basic rights, and also the possibility it will open up?

MS. WITTES: Okay. For those of you who weren't able to hear, it was another question about how American domestic politics relate to the negotiations, and is it possible to form sufficient political consensus here in the U.S. that on what the Iranians view as their clear rights under the and their minimum for a deal, including the right to enrich, which both of you addressed a bit in our discussion earlier.

But the domestic politics here for the United States are not simple. So how do we tackle this? Of course, you know, this is something that -- this is one of the reasons why you and Bill Loris have been doing a lot of this work.

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: Yeah. No, let me begin with the MEK. I think it was a bad decision. I think it was a dumb idea. But, in effect, that was done presumably for lots of extraneous reasons to Iran. On the other hand, we now have another barrier to cross with the Supreme Leader, and I think that's there. I think that

only through conversations and then actions or actions and conversations can you get there.

And it was the same problem about having Vice President Biden talk at Munich while almost conterminously we were tightening up sanctions. To some extent, we need more syncopation or we need some more appreciation of the interrelationships.

On the right to enrich, I mean, I'm perfectly happy to do it, not that I think the U.S. by any stretch of the imagination is the authority that authorizes rights to enrich under NPT or anything else. It's a little bit of an exercise in kind of illegitimate grandiosity. On the other hand, if that's what they want, I think we should be able to say it.

Our problem is that they are not in good standing with the IAEA yet, and while I think that's a diversionary problem, what they did in 2003, I hope they don't do again. And one would like to have a truth commission kind of exercise with the IAEA on that and get it out of the way. It is not a primary question to be resolved for the future so much as it is to clean up the past, a little bit like sweeping up after the horses in the Memorial Day parade, and it ought to be done. But it is a cloud over the right to enrich in terms of standing.

The second question is how do we deal with the Security Council? The notion that Iran can pick and choose its Security Council resolutions is not a happy notion. It is not of the character, I suppose, of the threat of regime change. But it has some of the same kind of nonchalance about what's mine is mine, and what's yours is negotiable. And that also the Iranians, I think, need to realize as they go into a negotiation that there are two sides to this issue, and that the one side all satisfactory result by enshrining their great morale and moral principles as a necessary kowtow to them in order to begin the process is costly. But we would have the right on our side to

expect something equal, reciprocal, and opposite. And to me, neither of these kinds of pre-conditioned pieces make a lot of sense.

But I would be very happy to say that if we have a deal and your civilian program is going ahead, we of necessity of course recognize your right under the NPT to have a civil nuclear program. All we need to do now is to define that program. And I think once we're over the hurdle of no enrichment, some enrichment, we're over the hurdle of being able to do that so far, as Ken points out. We may not yet be over that particular hurdle.

But I think that, you know, there are people in the U.S. side that say, well, I'm happy to get over that hurdle, but I want to sell it for something useful. So you have all of those negotiating pieces.

MR. POLLACK: Let me answer the questions. First, I just wanted to clear up, I think you may have me confused with someone else, maybe with other Pollack in town who's writing on this. I've never said -- written anything about the MEK.

And also on this issue of trust and regime change, you know, my thinking is the following, and I think it's a little bit different from what you expressed, which is, first, I'm not sure we ever will be able to get Khomeini to trust us, that we're not trying regime change. Again, it goes back to the, again, my answer to Barbara's question. And if that's the case, then one of two things is going to happen.

You know, first, I'm willing to do some things to convince them of that, although, again, I think as Tom keeps suggesting, it's an important one. The problems aren't all on the U.S. side. There are problems on the U.S. problems. There are equal or greater problems on the Iran side. So I don't think that we need to be constantly turning ourselves into pretzels and expecting the Iranians to do nothing.

If we can't get them to trust you, one of two things happens. Either we

don't get a deal, and, okay, that would be a shame. That would be awful in many ways, but at least we have some clarity there. And I think that clarity is very important and sorely lacking right now.

But alternatively, it may be that the Iranians, and I would hope that this is the case, that the supreme leader will actually realize that if he is afraid of regime change, the smartest thing he can do is make the deal, because the sanctions are crippling Iran. They are breeding enormous internal discontent. They are creating an atmosphere where there are a lot of groups who are unhappy, and there are a lot of people outside of Iran who are looking at it and saying, well, the sanctions haven't succeeded in convincing the Iranians. What is the next thing that we can do? And regime change is the obvious next thing.

In fact, you can make the argument that if the Iranians aren't willing to accept a deal, it will seem they are hell bent to get this capability, then by God we've got to get rid of the regime. That's the only alternative. So I think if Khamenei were really smart, he might recognize actually that if he really is concerned about regime change, making a deal is the smartest thing he can do. In fact, it is essential for him to do so.

With regard to your point, I'll simply add to Tom's point, which I think are absolutely excellent. The point that I think is important for us, which is that I think the United States is going to have to recognize that if we're going to get this deal with Iran, we're going to have to let the Iranians crow about it. They're going to have to be able to declare victory, which I think is an important element coming from your point about principle.

And I would hate to get into some kind of a fight where American politicians and Iranian politicians scupper the deal because both sides want to claim victory and that the other side lost. We're going to have to present it, and American

Administration is going to have to say, you know what? We both won. Tom's point about it has to be win-win, and we're going to have to let them announce to the world that they did succeed in defending their rights.

You know what? If that's what they need, fine. I want to make sure that we have limits on that program so that they can't move beyond what they have.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Okay, let's take a question in the very back corner there, and then right in front of him there's another we can just --

SPEAKER: The question is: why do we care so much about Iran and not about North Korea, for instance?

(Laughter)

MS. WITTES: Okay. And then just pass the mic to the gentleman in front of you. Yeah, there.

MR. LEVINE: Edward Levine, retired from the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I wonder what the implications are, if any, for Iran and for the process of the Secretary General's comments on Iran to the *Washington Post* last week.

MS. WITTES: Okay. Two good model questions in terms of their brevity. Daniello's question I think also raises the issue of proliferation around the region. One of the reasons why the Obama Administration says that Iranian nuclear capability is such a threat is because it would lead to a cascade of proliferation around the Middle East. So I'd love if you could address that as well.

MR. POLLACK: First of all, I'll answer the question as posed very quickly, which is I'm just a dumb Middle East expert, okay? So this obsession on Iran, I'm talking about Iran. But I actually have a great deal of sympathy for the sentiment, which I do think that North Korea is a very big problem. And, in fact, you know, we often

have this debate about, you know, is Iran rational? How would they would behave?

From what I understand of North Korea, you could barely fill a thimble with what I know about North Korea. But my sense is that they're not always entirely rational either, or that there's some things that go on in that regime that can lead them to do things that don't always seem rational to other people. That does worry me enormously.

But let me take it to where (inaudible) wanted to go, which I think is a good one. I think it gets to North Korea as well, and this issue of proliferation.

I think that proliferation is a very big concern about Iran's nuclearization. I think it is one of the reasons why, as I suggested before, it would really be better if we don't have to continue going down this road, if Iran does never cross certainly the weaponization threshold, because I think it could drive countries.

That said, I also think that there is a hysteria around proliferation. And again, I think this is the problem that we've got in Iran, and there's hysteria on both sides. Yes, proliferation is a very real problem. By the same token, I don't expect that the entire region will go nuclear the day after Iran proliferates.

I think Saudi Arabia is by far the biggest problem. I think that the Saudis are very fearful of the Iranians, and I think that they have a whole variety of rationales for why it makes sense for them to have a nuclear capability of some kind the day after.

That said, I think even within Saudi Arabia there are disincentives, and there are all kinds of clever things that the Saudis can do. They have an arrangement with the Pakistanis. They can proliferate opaquely, or they can do things that may make people wonder if they have acquired that capability without actually passing the threshold.

And what we've seen from the Saudis is actually they're very clever

about these kinds of things. We don't give the Saudis enough credit. I mean, let's remember -- Tom will remember this very clearly -- in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War, we had the missile wars between Iran and Iraq. Everybody wanted ballistic missiles. The Iranians and Iraqis had active nuclear programs. The Saudis go out and very quietly they buy nuclear capable Chinese CSS2s.

Nobody knows whether they got a nuclear warhead. I think most of us believe that they probably didn't, but the Saudis never answered the question. They assured us. They made all kinds of warm and fuzzy noises. But they never said categorically that they were never going to do so. And that again left this ambiguity that's very important.

Beyond the Saudis, the UAE has its own reasons, but who knows if the Saudis will be interested in have the UAE go down that path.

Turkey, you know, certainly some risk there, but their NATO membership is very big. They may not go in that direction. Egypt I think is the worst case. The Egyptians have a lot of other problems on their plate, and if they didn't proliferate as a result of Israel, then it seems hard that they would do -- are unlikely to do so in the case of Iran.

So just to sum up my point, come back to my first point, proliferation absolutely is an issue. It is a very big issue. It is one of the reasons why it would be much better that the Iranians never acquire this capacity. By the same token, we also shouldn't push that point too far and suddenly assume that the entire region explodes into nuclear proliferation, and then nuclear, and then nuclear war thereafter.

President Kennedy famously predicted that we would live in a world of 25 nuclear states, you know, within about 15, 20 years. That still hasn't come to pass. There are strong disincentives, but there is also no question, to go back to your starting

point, that proliferation is a problem is a problem, especially when it goes to countries like North Korea.

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: Okay. On the North Korea-Iran question, I'm concerned about the dichotomy of dealing. But North Korea has a different set of relationships. As I mentioned earlier, it has enormous capability to do very serious damage without the use of nuclear weapons to South Korea. And that would be a huge mess.

It lives next to a very large country that looks very much at North Korea as a buffer arrangement, which keeps, for the moment, a hostile, or semi-hostile, or potentially antagonistic, or even just friendly military forces away from its border. And that is interesting.

My own feeling is we do not have enough conversation, at least that I know about, with the Chinese or with the future of the peninsula. And I think there are important steps to be made. We are not yet where we are in Syria, maybe thank God. But we are not yet where we are in Syria in terms of the kinds of conversations that may have to do with some inevitable change in the future.

However, if that happens, I can't see the Supreme Leader being radically comfortable with the notion that the wonderful regime in Pyongyang is no more, and that there is some new perhaps more benign, more helpful, more united Korea for the future, which is, I think, what we're all sort of pledged to without being specific about either how to get there or what the overall formulation might be like. So be careful what you wish for. It has unintended potential consequences that need to be looked at very carefully.

The second point on proliferation, I agree with Ken. I perhaps am a little more concerned that were Iran to go, the impulse would increase. One only has to see in the last two years the sudden interest in civil nuclear power programs in some of the oil

rich and non-oil rich states of the region to be a little concerned, but it's a great opportunity for us to get the right kind of 123 agreement with them to try to nail it down.

I also think there is a very interesting question out there that has pros and cons of significance. Should we begin to find a way to strengthen the kind of security assistance assurances we're prepared to provide under the NPT to states that might in the future be threatened, but aren't now exactly, and how and in what way should we deploy that.

It would have, in my view, for the right agreement with Iran some potential, even if it's seemingly millennial now. But we have to be careful. We have seen in the neighborhood a problem for Iran, at least with respect to other nuclear steps, and is Iran, in fact, responding. Well, a country that doesn't admit that it has any interest in creating weapons is a hard country to pin down on why it might like to have weapons.

On the other side, is there a role for the United States, as I said, in strengthening those assurances, or are we now so close to the new idea of containment, which is basically seemingly to permit Iran to go nuclear, and then deal with the aftermath through deterrence and other relationships that we are now blocked from adopting elements that might otherwise be useful, but could be seen or misinterpreted as swinging, pivoting, rebalancing toward containment? I don't know. Those are questions that are out there that I think need to be part of the dialogue and about which I think there are no really rapidly-available happy answers.

MS. WITTES: And then the UN Secretary General has had an interesting time of it. Of course he went to Tehran and met with the Supreme Leader during the Non-Aligned Movement conference, but then made some very critical comments. So how is trying to position himself here?

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: Well, I think he's hopefully trying to

position himself strongly in favor of nonproliferation, regardless of the need on his part to stay in touch with all member-states. And he's got to find a way to step over that bridge without having one foot stuck on either side. And so far, okay.

MS. WITTES: So this is just a balancing act.

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: Well, I think it has to be a very serious part of the balancing act. He can disagree with member-states who seemingly are acting against what is the preeminent -- how many members of the NPT, 190-some? Only 194 members of the UN. So, in fact, it is a very universal agreement.

MS. WITTES: Okay. I think we have time for one more very quick round in the center here. The gentleman in the tan jacket, yes, and then the lady two rows behind you. Please be brief.

MR. REINHOLD: Hi. Jonathan Reinhold, visiting professor of Israeli politics at George Washington University. Strangely enough I have a question about how Israel fits in this.

President Obama is going to be visiting Israel very soon, and we've spoken today about the 20 percent enrichment deal. The conversation in Israel hinges on the other side to that and the credibility of the United States if a deal does not go along those lines of using military force. And the big question has to do with the trigger, what would trigger that.

So I'd like to hear your opinions on your visit and what you think of the whole debate.

MS. WITTES: Thank you very much. Please.

MS. VARGAS: Hello. Christine Vargas, recent graduate, Johns Hopkins. I just thank you so much for being here. I have a million questions for you guys, but I'll stick with one.

MS. WITTES: Thank you.

MS. VARGAS: And it has to do with power players. The current government in Iran is very right wing because the Ayatollah built it that way over the past two decades. But every government has its hawks and doves. Are these factions and any others that exist unified in their vision of a future Iran that's either engaged with the region with nuclear energy or isolated with nuclear weapons? And what does the next possible generation of power players feel about this if we assume that regime change doesn't happen, and that includes the opinion, if we get one, of a new Ayatollah. Thank you so much.

MS. WITTES: Okay. So even brutal autocracies have domestic politics, so is there --

MR. POLLACK: Why don't I start and give Tom the last word?

MS. WITTES: Okay.

MR. POLLACK: Let me take those questions in reverse order, and these are huge, wonderful questions, and I wish that we had more time to really deal with them.

In answer to the question about Iranian politics moving forward, again I'm left with "I don't know" and "it depends." And I think that we have to -- I think it's important to remember that because we have such limits on our understanding of Iran. And what's more, Iranian politics are such that it is very hard to know which direction they're going to develop in, especially when you start projecting out into the future beyond this supreme leader.

And I come back to a point that Tom made that I've also echoed, which is I don't know what the answer to that is, but I think that we have to find out. And I think part of what we need to be doing is trying to show the Iranians that there is a path whereby they can attain at least their minimal objectives, as long as they're minimal

objectives don't include things like trying to destroy the United States of America, Israel, Saudi Arabia, other friends of ours. If that's not part of their minimal objectives, and I assume that isn't, that they can attain their minimal objectives through a path of compromise and negotiated settlement of these disputes.

I don't know whether that's possible, but I think that it is critical that the United States explore that and we put on the table a deal that the Iranians ought to be willing to accept because it is consistent with at least their declared statements. That will at least give us some insight.

Professor Reinhold, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm a great admirer of your work. And again, I wish -- as an old military analyst, I wish I had lots of time to explain this. I can't. Glad to talk with you offline if you want to.

I will simply say I think that Ehud Barak had it right, okay, when he's talked about a zone of immunity. Israel has entered that zone of immunity. Fordo is operational, okay? That's not to say that Israel does not have a military option. It is simply to say that Israel's military operation, which was always going to be difficult, has become much more so, okay?

That military option is going to persist in its current state until Iran actually fields an arsenal. So as far as I'm concerned, as long as Iran doesn't field an arsenal, the Israeli trigger is now completely elastic, okay? They can go tomorrow. They can go two years from tomorrow. As long as Iran has not declared that arsenal, it does not affect their ability to do what damage they can. Ultimately their ability to do that damage is limited.

The same thing for the United States. The Massive Ordnance Penetrators, the MOPs -- as long as the MOPs can clean up Fordo, then, pardon the pun, then we've got until Iran fields a weapon. And that means that we actually have quite a

bit of time. That's not to say that I have a problem with what the Israeli government is doing. While I don't always like the way that the Israel government does it, I recognize that Israel has played a very important role in keeping international focus on Iran. Had the Israeli government not done that over the last 10 years, I think that the world would've forgotten about Iran a long time ago, and I think that we would be living with a nuclear Iran.

MS. WITTES: Tom, it does suggest, though, that one trigger might be the removal of materiel from Fordo.

AMBASSADOR PICKERING: Let me just do the two questions in the same order. I think that Ken is right. In simple terms, a proposal on the table to Iran, which essentially does what Iran continues to claim it wants, is not capitulation in my view. It is something we can live with, particularly if Ken and I both agree, as we do, on the value of the inspections and indeed the strengthening of the inspection system. And so let me leave it there.

Defining hawks and doves in Iran, and following the various course of actions, and trying to decide who's on top of where is an imminently respectable and indeed is an extremely valuable profession. The real problem is that it hasn't given us those scintillating moments of deep insight that would help us in the negotiating process in a way to get it through. But it has, I think, moved us in the direction in which I think Ken and I agree is that we put something on the table that we believe has a reasonable chance of succeeding, which protects our important interests, and which, in fact, gets as close as we can to meeting what they continually say they want. And if they don't take what they want, then we have a different problem, and we need to look at it very quickly. And we have ways to do it.

That takes us to Israel. This little book came to the conclusion that as of

the summer, zones of impunity, immunity, whatever aside, Israel had a capacity probably in the neighborhood of a delay of the Iranian program for two years, in the U.S., four years, maybe a little bit more. And they related to different styles of attack, different capacities of attack, different times for the duration of an attack and everything else.

None of them in any book I've ever read, short of a permanent occupation on the ground of Iran, has the capacity to stop forever. So the first thing we have is the military, is a temporary solution, and the notion that maybe something will turn up. And it has a temporary solution with a lot of very serious drawbacks. And that's one of the reasons why it's on the table, but not rapidly being used.

And I would think that from what the President has said, without his accepting Bibi's challenge to draw his red line in specific perhaps time-bound times, he's basically said if Iran is going ahead to make a nuclear weapon, and we think we would know about it, and I think there are reasons to believe that, then he would be prepared to use military force. But he didn't say he would use military force first either. There may well be things that he would want to do before using military force, depending on judgments about time. And they all related to the questions of what you know, when you know it, and how you're prepared to take advantage of it.

I think he has rejected pretty well the notion that as Israel ostensibly loses capability to achieve the two years or begins to lose capability to get to two years, from his point of view that is not the reasonable, rational trigger for military action on the part of the United States. And I think he's made that very clear, and I think the prime minister accepted that in his UN speech where he put the delay in.

We are now facing, again, the end of some kind of nominal delay period. Are we again going to argue about time and military force and when to use it? I have no idea. A lot will depend on the visit. I'm delighted the visit is taking place. As you know, I

was ambassador to Israel, and I would, if I were there, have fought for it in the first year. It was a logical and important step to take, and something that I believe was missing from the equation, which should've been there early. But I'm delighted it's taking place now, and it presents another opportunity not to resolve all problems and difficulties, but clearly to see, in fact, that the kind of tenuous and messy modus vivendi we have, can that be continued because on the time side, I think there is one clear commitment against a weapon. On the other side, there is no clear commitment that this has to take place by a date certain. And that seems to me to be the essence of the deal at the present time. My feeling is that's helpful, that we'll continue to hold things.

I think frequent forays into aggressive military stances without producing a result is like frequent predictions that the bomb will be in their hands next year. And each one of these has been right only insofar as it has been repeated on a regular basis. Let me leave it there.

MS. WITTES: All right. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in thanking Tom Pickering and Ken Pollack for this fantastic discussion. Thank you so much, and we'll see you next time. Thank you.

(Applause)

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