

Iranians Float an Offer the West Should Not Refuse

Will Anti-War Forces Seize this Opportunity?

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If there were any substance to Condi Rice's repeated assertions, that the strife over Iran's nuclear program could, and preferably should, be solved through diplomatic means, then one would expect the U.S. Secretary of State to seize on recent offers made by Iranian figures, designed to facilitate the start of talks. Although widely ignored in the international press, highly significant statements were made at an international conference in Berlin June 24-25, by two authoritative Iranian spokesmen, one an academic, the other a political leader and brother of the new Majlis (Parliament) speaker Ali Larijani. Both said explicitly that Tehran would be willing to freeze its uranium enrichment, and to provide for concrete mechanisms to guarantee that its enrichment program would not, and could not, be geared to weapons production.

Instead of acknowledging these ostentatious gestures of good will, the U.S. surged ahead with new legislation to introduce yet more sanctions against Iran, which are clearly designed to prepare a military aggression, and the European Union kicked in with its own new punitive sanctions.(1) At the same time, military consultations between Washington and Tel Aviv about Iran have gained in frequency and intensity, and the rhetoric from U.S. and Israeli leaders threatening war has reached such a fever pitch as to send oil prices into the stratosphere.(2)

Can war be averted, even at this late hour? Hopefully, it can. Clearly, if the Anglo-American war party in Washington and Tel Aviv has already decided to proceed with their "final solution" to the Iran problem, before the Cheney-Bush junta is forced to leave the White House, there is little hope that these new overtures made by Iran will have any effect. But at the same time, this gives all the more reason for those of us committed to prevent a new catastrophe in the Persian Gulf/Middle East to mobilize political forces to call the bluff on the war party, and demand that Tehran's newly articulated ideas about how the conflict may be peacefully resolved, be taken up in political fora and in the international press. On that basis, serious, unprejudiced discussions must begin right away. Among the key political forces to be mobilized are Russia and China, veto-holding powers in the U.N. Security Council, who know that aggression against Iran is to be seen as merely the stepping-stone to future aggression against both sovereign nations. The issue should also be prominently thrust into the forefront of the ongoing election campaigns in the United States. Where do Barack Obama and John McCain stand on these new Iranian offers?

An Offer The West Should Not Refuse

Thus far, in the conflict ostensibly over Iran's nuclear program, the sticking point has been that the West (be it the U.S. or the 5+1 Group — the U.N. Security Council five permanent members plus Germany) has demanded that Iran suspend its uranium enrichment program,

as a pre-condition for talks about the future of the program. The Islamic Republic, citing the provisions of the Non Proliferation Treaty, which it has signed, has always responded that it has the right to enrichment, and will not relinquish it as a precondition for any talks. Not only: in the Berlin meeting, several authoritative figures, including former IAEA Director General Dr. Hans Blix, confirmed Iran's right to this technology. One should in addition consider the following paradox: if Iran were to suspend enrichment as a condition to start talks on the future of its nuclear program, then there may be three possible outcomes: either the talks succeed, in which case Iran would retain the right to enrichment in some mutually acceptable form; or Iran agrees to suspend its program; or, the talks fail, in which case, Iran would continue its program anyway, perhaps leaving the NPT and renouncing IAEA inspections. In short: the demand for suspension as a precondition is not only politically unjust and contrary to law (the NPT), but it is also absurd by the standards of any logic. As a postscript, it should be added, that Iran did suspend its uranium enrichment program for the not inconsiderable period of two years, under the Presidency of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami. But what did that yield? Nothing.

Now, in what should be considered a sincere attempt to settle the nuclear dispute peacefully and amicably, the Iranians have gone the extra mile. In the course of the Third Transatlantic Conference organized by the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF), on the theme, "Missile Defense, Russia, and the Middle East: Coping with Transatlantic Divergence — Exploring Common Solutions," two Iranian spokesmen addressed the issue: Dr. Mohammad Javad A. Larijani, former Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran, and Director of the Institute for Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics, as well as brother of Dr. Ali Larijani, now speaker of the Parliament, and former head of the National Security Council and thus negotiator in the nuclear issue; and political scientist, Prof. Nasser Hadian-Jazy of the University of Tehran.

Prof. Hadian-Jazy presented himself from the outset as an interlocutor ready to engage with the other side. Regarding Iran's missile program, for example, he cited testimony he had given to a U.S. Senate committee, in which he had presented proposals for limits on the range and production of Iranian missiles. The proposals were not taken seriously, he said, but he reiterated that, if there were a serious proposal from the U.S side, a deal would be possible.

Regarding the immediate issue of Iran's nuclear program, he stressed, first, that Iran had no nuclear weapons program, that Iranians desired no such thing, but that they are committed to the civilian energy program, which enjoys unconditional public support. He said, Iran opposes the weaponization of its nuclear program, and that "a deal can be made." This would involve a "robust verification system" which could "limit enrichment quantitatively and qualitatively." When asked by this author to elaborate on this, (also in light of proposals floated in the U.S. by Thomas Pickering et al to overcome the enrichment dilemma), Prof. Hadian-Jazy said Iran should not be told it must suspend uranium enrichment, but that it would accept a freeze. "There is a difference between freeze and suspension," he said. "If suspension were to be accepted, that would be as a {result} of negotiations, not as a {condition}. It would be folly," he noted, "for Iran to give up its bargaining chip before starting talks." He went on to specify: "We can limit enrichment to 6 cascades, quantitatively, and as for the qualitative side, we can use the 'black box' approach, which means not exceeding 4-5% enrichment." This, he said, is something European and U.S. scientists understand. Furthermore, following enrichment, the fuel can be deposited elsewhere, and then returned to Iran for use. "There should be a will," he stressed," to

resolve the issue peacefully, with a face-saving formula for both sides.”

Dr. Mohammad Javad A. Larijani, former Deputy Foreign Minister and Director of the Institute for Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics, struck a similar note. “We are open to a deal,” he said, but “not to an order.” Regarding enrichment, he explained why his country insisted on having this technology: “Since we do not have the security of access [to nuclear fuel], we need to have a backup.” A commitment to secure access, would build confidence. “They can measure the degree and weight of enrichment,” he pledged, “and could track it. If we succeed in this one step, then we can take two more. It cannot be solved overnight,” but it can be solved. Larijani mooted also the possibility of Iran’s implementing the Additional Protocol to the NPT, “and even an additional one beyond the Protocol.”

The only open discussion of a freeze option known to this author, includes a statement made by Sergei Lavrov following a meeting on Iran of the 5+1 group in London. Lavrov’s statement cited by AFP on May 3, was somewhat ambiguous: “Our first conditions are the freezing, suspension of uranium enrichment. The approach of the six (powers) is that Iran should suspend enrichment only for the period in which talks continue.” The other reference to a freeze came in an OpEd by former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer in The Daily Star

(www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=5&article_id=92572)

Fischer referred to the latest 5+1 bargaining position, saying, “The decisive question ... will be whether it will be possible to freeze the Iranian nuclear program for the duration of the negotiations to avoid a military confrontation before these negotiations are completed.” Seymour Hersh, in his most recent New Yorker piece, “Preparing the Battlefield,” to appear July 7, said he spoke with Fischer a week earlier, who told him: “The proposal says that the Iranians must stop manufacturing new centrifuges and the other side will stop all further sanctions activities in the U.N. Security Council.” Hersh added that Fischer said, Iran would have to freeze enrichment to begin negotiations, and that he thought Tehran could agree.

Whether or not the public statements by Prof. Hadian-Jazy and Dr. Mohammad Javad Larijani in Berlin, came in response to these hints is an open question, but not unlikely.

Missile Defense Fraud Exposed

These very important specifications from the Iranian side, came in the context of a broader strategic discussion on the U.S. plans for deploying radar and missile defense systems in the Czech Republic and Poland, allegedly to defend Europe and the U.S. from a supposed Iranian nuclear missile attack. The panels devoted to this issue examined it from the technical and political point of view, and were not only useful, but, in part, also somewhat amusing.

What emerged from presentations by technical experts, like Dr. Juergen Altmann of Dortmund University, was that Iran does not possess missiles with the range required to reach the Czech Republic or Poland, 3300 km away, not to mention the U.S. at a distance of 10,000-13,000 km. Its Shahab-3 missiles have a range of 1,300 km. But, for the sake of argument, Altmann said, if Iran were to have missiles with such a range, then any missiles directed to the American midwest would have to travel over Belarus or Russia, with obvious implications. Furthermore, Iran does not at present possess nuclear weapons. This point was confirmed by a leftwing German member of Parliament, Paul Schaefer, who reported that “nothing presented to us” in the Parliament “by German intelligence or military shows that

Iran is going for nuclear weapons, against the U.S. or Europe.”

Were Iran to have such capabilities and intentions, what kind of defense would be effective? This was the laughable part, as the fraud of missile defense was inadvertently exposed. Victoria Samson, of the Washington-based Center for Defense Information, noted that the MD program is hotly contested, because it is largely untested; one test conducted in September 2006 revealed serious problems, and the next scheduled test will not take place before December 2008. Adj. Prof. Dr. Bernd W. Kubbig, of the PRIF, had recalled in his keynote, that the Pentagon’s Missile Defense Agency last year “candidly acknowledged that the Ground-based Missile Defense system has no demonstrated effectiveness to defend either American territory [or Europe, one could add].” Dr. Karl-Heinz Kamp of the NATO Defense College in Rome offered the suggestion that it didn’t matter whether the things work or not; what matters is whether or not the enemy believes it works. The only rabid enthusiast for MD was Dr. Uzi Rubin, former Senior Director for Proliferation and Technology, at the Israeli National Security Council in Tel Aviv. Rubin, known as the “father” of Israel’s Arrow MD program, extolled its capabilities to defend Israel against anything and everything: from Iranian missiles, to Syrian Scuds, to Hezbollah’s Katushas, to anything that Hamas and Islamic Jihad could launch. His colleague, Dr. Reuven Pedatzur, from Tel Aviv University, argued on the contrary, that the Arrow program had a problem with leakage, and that therefore Israel’s known — though not official — (nuclear) deterrence were necessary. He went so far as to suggest that MD would have a negative effect, in that it would undermine the image of Israel’s deterrent in the eyes of the enemy. It is all a perception game, after all. Even speakers from the nations targeted for deployment, the Czech Republic and Poland, exhibited somewhat tempered enthusiasm for the program, and Jiri Schneider from the Prague Security Studies Institute had to admit that 55-65% of the population opposed the plan.

Now: if Iran does not have the nuclear weapons or the delivery systems needed to target the perceived enemy/enemies, and if the MD systems designed to intercept these non-existent missiles don’t work, then why is the Bush-Cheney regime so adamant about deploying them? Victoria Samson made the useful observation that MD had already been used in wartime, in 1991 and 2003 in the Iraq conflicts. Although their performance was somewhat doubtful, except in friendly fire, this deployment raised the question of whether such systems are really solely defensive, a point also raised by Prof. Kubbig. And, she recalled that the U.S. had shot down one of its own satellites in February, in a rather demonstrative act.

For Russia and China there is no mystery. The projected MD deployments in eastern Europe have nothing to do with Iran’s purported threat. The main point made by Dr. Timur Kadyshev, from the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, was that the proposed interceptors could hit Russian ICBMs. This would severely undermine Russia’s second strike capability in the event of a nuclear attack against its territory. Dr. Alexander Pikayev, of the Institute for World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) in Moscow, echoed this, adding that Russia could not be sure whether or not the silos the U.S. was setting up would house surface-to-surface missiles or not. Both Russian spokesmen indicated that their country’s response to deployment, and a possible attack, would be massive. Kadyshev said the MD, if deployed, would be targeted by Russian ballistic missiles, and that short-range missiles would be deployed in Kaliningrad. Pikayev said that if MD were placed near Russia’s borders, then the country’s early warning systems would go into action, and Russian missiles would be on automatic launch. “If you build security at your neighbor’s expense,”

he said, "then your neighbor will respond at your expense." Both experts from Russia lamented the fact that the U.S.'s opting for MD meant Washington was in effect discounting any diplomatic solution, thus sending a very bad message to Tehran. If there were a threat from Iran, Kadyshev added, then a joint surveillance effort could be mounted at the Gabala radar facility in Azerbaijan, or elsewhere, for example, Turkey.

Although China is not so directly targeted by the proposed MD deployment, its leadership has read the political message quite correctly. Prof. Dr. Xia Liping, from the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, posited that the MD systems could be retooled to use nuclear weapons offensively. Stressing China's need to protect its second strike capability in the event of a nuclear attack, he said that his country would have to increase the number of ICBMs at its disposal to counter the growing number of interceptors. As for the political consequences of the MD deployment, he said that China might have to review its policy on Iraq and Afghanistan, a policy which has been directed toward economic aid for stabilization. He concluded his remarks saying that "if they regard China as a potential enemy, then we may become the enemy."

What About Peace As An Alternative?

A rational response to the alleged Iranian missile threat, would be to change the prevailing paradigm completely, and introduce a positive one. Instead of discussing the merits and demerits of MD and/or nuclear deterrents, why not explore the ways and means of establishing durable peace in the entire region? To do so would require solving the 60-year-old Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which is the festering sore of the entire body. This was laid out in some detail by H.H. Prince Turki M. Saud Al-Kabeer, Deputy Minister for Multilateral Relations of the Saudi Kingdom. Declaring that the Arabs had chosen peace as a strategic option back in the 1991 Madrid conference, Prince Turki reviewed the Saudi initiative, endorsed by the Arab League in 2002, which calls for the establishment of normal diplomatic ties with Israel in exchange for a return to the 1967 borders. But Israel must cease activities which change the situation on the ground and impede talks, like erecting new settlements, building a wall, blockading Gaza and so forth. The same point was made quite forcefully by Prof. Dr. Judith Palmer-Harik, president of Matn Univeristy in Beirut. Her speech reviewed the reasons why Hezbollah and Hamas had taken up arms against Israel, and argued that the illegal occupation of Palestinian lands must be terminated in a negotiated peace. Such a comprehensive peace constitutes also the only reliable guarantee of security for Israel, although this thought seems to have escaped the notice of the Israeli speakers present. Dr. Pedatzur said that, since the conference title did not refer to peace, it was off the agenda.

A prerequisite for finally achieving a durable peace, bolstered by regional economic cooperation agreements to build basic infrastructure, is untying the knot of the so-called Iranian nuclear threat. The two Iranian representatives in Berlin spelled out how far their country is willing to go to make talks possible. What Dr. Larijani in particular emphasized was the need for a new paradigm in the attitudes of the interlocutors. His "first principle," was that one must "abandon the hostile paranoid attitude towards Iran for a while, and replace it with a mindset that goes for realistic interaction." This means speaking to one another as equals. "Let us acknowledge each other," he said; "Europe and the U.S. are major players, but they are not omnipotent." Iran, he added, is not omnipotent either, but must be recognized as a major player in the region. Dealing with the nuclear dispute per se, Larijani listed three catchwords, NPT, transparency and mutual commitment.

Dr. Hans Blix, former General Director of the IAEA, and former Swedish Foreign Minister, reflected similar thinking, when he urged that the Iran case be approached in a manner akin to that of the six-party talks on North Korea, i.e. that one should not demand suspension as a pre-condition, but rather offer security guarantees (no war and no regime change).

If such a new paradigm can be introduced, anything is possible. Larijani here repeated Iran's offer in its recent letter to Russia, China, the EU, UN and others(3): that all crises in the region, from Afghanistan (which he characterized as a situation worse than Iraq), to Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, can be dealt with as "in a parcel," with the constructive contribution of Tehran. "We have already had some indulgence," he noted, "in the issue of Lebanon," pointing to Iran's role in breaking the deadlock around the presidential election. And, U.S.-Iranian talks have already taken place on Iraq.

At present, Iran is considering the proposal of the 5+1 group, delivered by EU Foreign Policy representative Javier Solana. Although the proposal speaks of suspension of uranium enrichment as a precondition for talks, Joschka Fischer's remarks indicate they may be thinking in terms of a freeze. Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki stated that Tehran preferred to identify the common points between that proposal and the one Iran sent out, and to enter concrete talks on that basis. A vigorous and urgent diplomatic offensive must be launched now, taking advantage of the new specifications provided by Iran. If not, as IAEA Director General Mohammad ElBaradei recently warned, a military attack against the Islamic Republic would turn the entire region into a "ball of fire."

Notes

1. On H.CON. RES. 362, see "Is a new Congressional Resolution declaring War with Iran?" by Emily Blout, (www.campaigniran.org/casmii/index.php?q=node/5418/print) and Rep. Ron Paul's powerful denunciation of it (www.presstv.ir/pop/print.aspx?id=61795). For the EU sanctions, and Bank Melli's response, see www.tehrantimes.com/NCmss//2007.asp?code=171689).

2. Several high-level U.S. military have been to the U.S. and Israelis to the U.S., discussing Iran. See "Security and Defense: Not leaving the nuclear threat up in the air," by Yaakov Katz, in the June 26 Jerusalem Post (www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1214492515999&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle)

3. See my analysis of the Iranian letter, "Countdown to the end of the Bush-Cheney regime: War with Iran: What could happen if?" at www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=9250.

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