



## Iran: A Diplomatic Solution

### [U.S. Global Engagement Program](#)

#### [Thomas R. Pickering](#), [David C. Speedie](#)

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#### **Introduction**

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Good afternoon, everyone. Let me just say briefly today's format will be our speaker will speak for about 25 minutes, and then there will be ample time for questions and interaction from the audience.

It is always, of course, a great pleasure to welcome back Ambassador Pickering to the Carnegie Council, and it has never been more important and appropriate and timely that we have him here today. It's of course the oldest truism when introducing a speaker that he needs no introduction, so I'll be very brief.

Tom Pickering is a career ambassador, the highest rank of the U.S. Foreign Service. He has been ambassador to such important places at Nigeria, El Salvador, Israel, Jordan, India, and Russia, as well as the permanent representative of this country to the United Nations, and he subsequently served as under-secretary of state for political affairs.

As to his topic today, Iran, obviously the atmosphere in this is highly charged, perhaps unhealthily so, and the rhetoric is often distinctly bellicose.

There is a wonderful website, called the [Gulf2000 Project](#) website, that tracks all the developments in the region. It has had two recent streams that I just happened to pick out. One is headed, "Are we headed for another [Bay of Pigs](#)?" The second, "How to choke Iran without destroying the world economy." So there's not much conciliatory language going about.

In the policy arena itself, the [Netanyahu-Obama meetings](#) earlier this week, the two leaders' public statements did speak of "shared values." But time after time, Prime Minister Netanyahu repeated Israel's right to defend itself.

On the campaign trail here, the language is often not short of apocalyptic, with the [front-runner](#) for the Republican nomination [intoning](#) that "if Obama is reelected, Iran will get the bomb and the world will change." He didn't say "end," he just said "change."

Anyhow, to throw some light of reason on all of this we invited Ambassador Pickering, following his late December op-ed piece written with his friend and colleague Ambassador [William Luers](#) in *The Washington Post* on December 30, "[Military Action Isn't the Only Solution to Iran](#)." I'll just read two very brief extracts:

"History teaches us that engagement and diplomacy pay dividends that military threats do not. Deployment of military force can bring the immediate illusion of 'success' that always results in unforeseen consequences and collateral damage that complicate further the achievement of America's main objectives."

The last sentence says so much: "Greater knowledge and closer contact with an enemy reduce anxiety and reveal surer ways to avoid disaster."

Well, as a Council that focuses on the ethical components of foreign affairs, Tom, amen. And thank you so much for agreeing to speak to us today.

Please join me in welcoming Tom Pickering.

#### **Remarks**

**THOMAS PICKERING:** Thank you, David, very much for your very kind introduction. I think your posing of the formidable problems having to do with the country concerned leads me to want to turn the name of this lecture

into a pun.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Okay.

**THOMAS PICKERING:** Also, David, I'm delighted to be here, and thank you very much for having me back.

As someone who acquired a certain reputation for fast and reckless driving in my long Foreign Service career, I've often envied you your last name.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** But I've been stopped for that offense.

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I'm sure the police treat you better than they do me.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** We'll talk about that.

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I have really three things that I think would be useful to set out for you at the beginning, and then, hopefully, we'll get to your questions and your comments and your thoughts. I want to talk a little bit about what I think we know about the program in Iran that gives us the most trouble, the [nuclear program](#), and at the same time a little bit about some of the other areas about which we have differences with Iran.

I think it's important to understand that it is not just the nuclear issue that is vexatious in terms of where we are. Secondly, I want to talk a little bit about where we have come with Iran. Thirdly, a little bit about the options that lie out ahead of us. And then, perhaps with a heavier focus on the diplomacy option, which seems to have been getting short shrift in the press and elsewhere.

Let me begin by saying Iran was really interested in nuclear questions at the time of the [Shah](#), and he started a very large program. Indeed, the Shah was responsible for articulating a 20 civil power reactor objective, which has now been readopted by the revolutionary government, so called. The Shah went ahead. I think there were many of us who had suspicions that the Shah—much as Brazil, South Korea, Taiwan in those days—was interested in things beyond the civil program. But, out of deference to the Shah and his position in the world and his influence, I think we asked fewer questions than we should have.

When the [revolution](#) came, interestingly enough, the new regime called it off. The new regime has had a fairly firm policy that bombs like this are un-Islamic. And, interestingly enough, the Supreme Leader [Khamenei](#) within the last five days has repeated that particular *fatwah*, as they call it, which at the moment appears to be from his perspective a binding attribute of Iranian policy.

After the Iraqi attack against Iran in the early 1980s and the long eight-year [war](#), we saw evidence that the Iranians began again to look at their nuclear program. By the 1990s, we had not only had a dispute about a reactor they bought from Germany, which we succeeded in having Germany cancel, but at the same time they moved over to the Russians to build the reactor.

The Russians have a common policy that they will build reactors overseas but only on the basis they provide the fuel and take back the spent fuel. Reactors, of course, produce plutonium in the spent fuel, and so it's extremely important that the spent fuel route, so to speak, to a nuclear weapon, at least with respect to the [Bushehr reactor](#), has been closed off by the Russian policy.

At the same time that that happened, Iran began to be very interested in enrichment. Enrichment of uranium is, of course, important for civil power reactors, but it requires a very low level of enrichment, 3.5 to 5 percent. Any enrichment level above that begins to be suspicious because it begins to point toward moving to 90 percent or so, which makes uranium capable of being fissioned in a bomb. So we became very worried about that.

At the same time, in the late 1990s, it was quite clear that at least some Iranians, in whatever form that was to happen, made a deal with Mr. [A.Q. Khan](#) from Pakistan and bought, according to the description of a friend of mine from Iran, container-loads of material. His view was an Iranian view, that they didn't even know what they got but they paid a lot of money for it.

It turned out of, course, they got things that helped them improve their enrichment program. They got apparently at least a schematic plan for a nuclear weapon that appears to have Chinese origins and maybe they got other things that we don't know about.

That particular set of efforts went ahead until 2003. I'll leave you to judge what happened in 2003, but in 2003 apparently they made a conscious decision not to do things that would, in effect, constitute a committed program to make nuclear weapons.

Since then we believe—and I spent yesterday with friends in the U.S. government, and they believe—that the Iranian present posture is essentially that they are prepared to develop technology and other things that would put them in a position to be able to make a decision to move to a nuclear weapon, but they have not decided to

go to a nuclear weapon. Now, that seems to be widely shared, so it is not purely an Iranian explanation of its own program. But it is important to keep it in mind.

In the meantime, I would say the following about the Iranian program. They have something like 9,000 centrifuges. The bulk of those are enriching to the civil nuclear reactor scale, 3.5 percent, and they are storing the material they make because they have no current use for it, which is of course, among other things, one of the reasons why we have had serious questions about Iran's program.

Secondly, they some months ago decided they were going to start enriching to 20 percent because they have a reactor, which the United States supplied to the Shah, which they use for making medical isotopes (isotopes used, for example, in cancer treatments). That's what that reactor requires. They have something like 100 kilograms of 20 percent material, and they have something like 5 tons of low-enriched material probably now in Iraq, which if they did further work could put them in a position to have material for two, three, or four nuclear weapons, depending upon how you decide the technology.

So at this stage that in my view constitutes the program.

They have also dabbled a little bit in plutonium-style programs. They have another research reactor, which is not badly configured for producing plutonium, but it isn't working and it is still being worked on. One of the key questions that is often ignored with the preoccupation with uranium enrichment is that we also have to find a way to deal with this reactor. It's a so-called heavy water reactor, which means it can take uranium that is pretty much out of the mine and treat it and use it with a heavy water moderator to produce rather high-quality plutonium, if they get it going, and they have a heavy water plant to do that.

Well, that's more technology than you want to know and more than I understand. But it nevertheless gives you a sense that they have a program that has us concerned, in part because of what happened before 2003, in part because of what we understand to be their decision to do more than just make a purely civil program, but on the back of the civil program to produce enough information and technology that they could use it to move ahead should they decide to do so.

We have, of course, tried to pursue negotiations, as have they, at various times. The negotiations have been a particularly disturbing series of events for diplomats, because in large measure the negotiations have become a kind of pantomime, or perhaps a kind of square dance, in which we arrive at the dance circle every year with a proposal from one side or the other, which is pretty well turned down, and then we walk away and renegotiate the meeting for the year following.

So the good news these days is, in my view, that the Iranians have shown more interest in negotiation than I think we have seen for some time. I would be careful to say that doesn't mean that there is anything like a slam dunk here, that Iranians are masters of negotiations, they have grown up in a bazaar—not a bizarre but a bazaar—mentality, and they understand very well the value, and indeed the process, of how to negotiate. On the other hand, negotiations, even with difficult partners, put us pretty far ahead of where we would be with no negotiations with difficult partners.

What has happened in recent days is interesting.

First, not in recent days, six weeks ago, the Iranians said they were prepared to start negotiations.

Two weeks ago, they sent a [letter](#) to the IAEA, which has been the intermediary, the International Atomic Energy Agency of the United Nations, which is in a sense the master of nuclear inspections to prevent proliferation. The letter was, unlike previous Iranian letters, almost devoid of preconditions and almost a "plain vanilla" diplomatic invitation, which was encouraging.

Within days, there has been a response on the part of the "Western parties," so called (essentially Britain, France, Germany, Russia, China, and the United States) accepting the Iranian offer to negotiate. I expect that those negotiations will take place after Nowrooz, maybe in three, four, or five weeks. But we don't know for sure. Nowrooz, as you know, is the Iranian New Year.

The other things that have happened that I think have been quite interesting have been, on the Iranian side, in addition to what I would call the "plain vanilla" invitation, the [supreme leader](#) this morning was reported to have commented positively on President [Obama's](#) [speech](#) to AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee], something that we would not have expected.

Before that, he repeated again, just within days, the language of the *fatwah* against nuclear development.

And just before that, he reintroduced into the world of literature a book he wrote 40 years ago on an arcane subject having to do with the birth of Shiism. But the value of this particular introduction is that the last two words of the title contain the words "flexible compromise."

So it's a kind of interesting series of messages. Obviously, we don't know what to make of them, but in some ways those—I see [Tom Graham](#) over here, our ace Kremlinologist, post Kremlinologist—and others who spent their time in the [Cold War](#) looking for signs and portents. This is one that's hard to ignore, but it's certainly silly to accept this as absolutely a dispositive decision. But it is interesting.

On our side, for a long time there has been an internal dispute between us and the Europeans and also with the United States government over the question of whether in any negotiations we could emerge permitting Iran to do any enrichment, even if it were safely, or at least concretely, firewalled from efforts to make a nuclear weapon.

That has begun to break down. Secretary [Clinton](#) in February opened the door to that very carefully. President Obama, who has not declared himself in months on the question of where to go, was quite specific in the AIPAC speech about the fact that diplomacy—"the big D," as a lot of my friends call it—is now something he wishes to fasten on, and that from his perspective, while the military option is always there, it is his second (or maybe beyond) choice rather than the first choice.

This is a help, and this is the reason why I think the supreme leader's response is interesting, because we have finally seen now the beginning of an exchange of signals across the airwaves, which is something that has now in a fairly astonishing way begun to reinvigorate the potential for a meeting.

We had 32 years of separation and, with the rare exception perhaps in [setting up](#) the [Karzai](#) government at Bonn in 2001, we've had almost no cooperation with the Iranians on issues of importance to both of us. We have had a set of relationships which in many ways is a fertile field for psychology Ph.D.s in the area of mistrust and misunderstanding. And so in many ways it's something that we need to try to find a way to move toward overcoming as we go ahead, and we have to be acutely conscious of it.

My own view is that anyone who believes that they understand enough about Iranian internal politics to be able to use that as a set of guideposts to calculate how to move head on negotiations, and particularly with America's favorite fetish of trying to pick the negotiator on the other side, is doomed to bankruptcy. And anybody in Iran who thinks they understand American politics well enough to know that that will be the dispositive answer to the future of our relationship is probably in the same trap.

And so we are now moving ahead on the basis that we'll deal with you the way you are, and you must deal with us the way we are, and that we're dealing without preconditions. So there has been a new approach.

I think, finally, there has been lots of encouragement that the "one-off/one-stop/one-shopping" meeting is no longer a viable way to move—I hope but I don't know.

That brings me to the question of options. To some extent, negotiation has been the silent partner of the stealth option, the almost un-discussed alternative in this process. I have to tell you, as a devotee of Washington option production, I see four options, which is unusual—Washington only has three and you're supposed to choose the middle one. But let me give you four options in a kind of somewhat maligned fashion, so choosing the middle one is particularly painful.

The first option is a non-option, but it is important to understand it. That is to lie back and enjoy it. They will proliferate and then we can rely on deterrence to deal with the problem. Not a very good option, one that is designed in my view to encourage proliferation in the rest of the region.

It is certainly clear that within the last two years a lot of the Arab countries have suddenly developed this fascinating interest in civil nuclear power. We are very much aware of it, we're concerned about it, we're finding ways to keep it hedged, but it's nevertheless out there.

There are serious concerns on the part of some that Iran would immediately provide its first nuclear weapon to [Hezbollah](#) or  [Hamas](#) or somebody like that. I don't fear that. I think the first instinct of everyone who has acquired a nuclear weapon is to make sure nobody else gets it. The second instinct is to sit down and figure out what they're really going to do with it. Many have, like India, not answered that question, except of course if Pakistan were to use one against them.

So in many ways this is a kind of unstable and very uncertain field as you go down the road, and venturing into it raises a whole series of difficult problems, beside the fact that I think it would help to tear up on a final basis every effort we have been making on nonproliferation, and indeed would set back enormously the hope that many people have, however unrealistic people may consider it now, that we could actually move in the direction of either lower numbers or maybe zero nuclear weapons at some time, whatever that portends. That's another lecture. I'll come later for that.

I think that, therefore, the "lie back and enjoy it, let them proliferate" option for all those reasons makes no sense. It might be a result, and one would have to look at that and what to do with it, but it is not in my view a

useful option.

The second one, the one you're not supposed to choose because I think it's totally lunatic, is the military option. The military option has lots of problems and it has very few advantages.

On the advantage side, I think our friends in Israel would like to be able to set back the program even two (or maybe one) years, if they could, but on the expectation that something else will turn up. That is a very weak reason for moving to a fairly calamitous conclusion. The conclusion in my view is heavily tainted by a number of things.

One is that at the moment Iran does have a conscious non-decision, if I could put it that way, to go to nuclear weapons. But if they are attacked, and particularly if they are attacked on the basis of "they might get a weapon but they haven't decided yet," an unprovoked attack in every sense of the word, I think two or three things would result.

One is they would be perfectly justified to say, "We never thought we'd have to make a weapon. Not that we've been attacked, of course we have to make a weapon, and we'll go ahead and do it come hell or high water."

The second, basically, is Iran enjoys about a 15 percent popularity among the Muslim world, and certainly that will shoot up and skyrocket. Certainly there will be a lot of sympathy for Iran. Could we hold the [sanctions](#), and would there be any value in trying to hold the sanctions? You have to think about that and where would that go.

The second question is an operational question: Would we be able actually to know what all the targets are and where they are? We've had some success. Looking at the Iran program and knowing when they began things and didn't tell the world, we had a pretty good idea of where they were. But would we know where all the targets are? I don't know the answer to that question. That's a hard problem.

On the other side, the retaliatory capability that Iran could exercise is fairly large. They have influence with terrorist organizations that happen to straddle Israel with large numbers of missiles.

There is no question at all in my mind that they could operate in a terrorist way against "soft" American targets all around the world, and they could be things like businesses and NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and missionaries and everything else you can think of. And what would we be able to do and undertake to protect the huge American traveling public if in fact there was a very concerted and determined Iranian reaction? It would be on the scale in my view of responding to [9/11](#), and it would be very, very taxing and very difficult.

So let me leave that brilliant option aside. It is not in my view something one would totally rule out in extremis if Iran actually wanted to make a weapon, and we could take the information that we would base that decision on to the international community. I think we'd still have serious problems in the Security Council, but there would be more justification.

I also think that if Israel were to attack on its own we would share in every conceivable way the responsibility for the action, and indeed, whatever reactions were formulated, we would share a particularly important part of that.

I think, finally, before I go further on this, it's important to mention that in Israel there are some differences over the question. I think there are no differences in Israel yet over the question of the calamitous potential problems an Iranian nuclear weapon would cause for them, but there are certainly differences about when and how they might act.

We at least have the option, given the strength of our military forces, in responding to a decision on the Iranian side to go for a nuclear weapon, and under current circumstances they would literally have to declare that to the IAEA inspectors, or at least take actions to take the material that is now under IAEA safeguards away from the IAEA. So there is a real telltale of transparency there were they to go quickly to that particular option.

The Israelis now believe that increasingly it is harder for them using military force to attack the Iranian program in terms of the deep tunnels under the mountain at Qom and Fordow. So they are gradually—or maybe rapidly—using their capacity to take military action of significance against Iran, and that's very worrying to Israel and it drives things.

I think, finally, internally and politically in Israel, large numbers of people believe pretty clearly that Israel should not go alone, that it should go with the United States, if that's conceivable.

There are critical questions that Prime Minister [Netanyahu](#) has to resolve: Can he bring all the members, or most of the members, of his security cabinet along with him? Not all of them, I think, necessarily are totally convinced of where he stands, although I have to say I think a great majority of them are there.

Within the last six months, the Israelis have changed, just in the normal rotation, the chiefs of all three of their intelligence services and of their military. The outgoing chiefs of the intelligence services and the military have all



spoken out rather forthrightly and politically about their objection to military action. The incoming chiefs are in my view less influential politically and maybe less capable of speaking out, but it is not certain necessarily that they adopt with enthusiasm the notion that this is the way they want to go.

The third option, to take you back, is sanctions. We have relied heavily on sanctions to move the question ahead. Indeed, in my view they have had a potentially useful effect in diplomacy. Where I have been concerned is we haven't tied them yet to diplomacy, except in the last few days we are beginning to open the door in diplomacy.

But sanctions alone, with the dispute over what we would take in to the negotiating table on enrichment, has sort of meant we have been hooked to a policy that has all pressure but no open door. We are seemingly expecting this policy to produce Iran in our hands, like the traditional [Marxist](#) ripe plum from the tree, with almost any outcome we would dictate being acceptable. Of course, this is the way we bridge the gap between any permitted enrichment and no enrichment.

A negotiating option I've discussed in many ways around all of this: it appears to me that under these circumstances we have to start with something the Iranians have proposed. Starting with their proposal that they would end 20 percent enrichment, which takes them now halfway to the enrichment level for a bomb, not mathematically but in terms of the physics of enrichment, and at the same time paying for that in terms of providing the fuel for the medical isotope reactor, seems like a good start.

The other interesting thing is this small package to begin with could possibly be enhanced by two other things. One is that they have gone from 3.5 percent to 20 percent, so a cap at 5 percent is probably inherent with stopping enrichment at 20 percent. There's nothing in between that they can use.

I think, finally, the idea might be also if we produce the fuel for this reactor, we ought to ask them when we produce the fuel to give us the 20 percent enriched material which would be otherwise incorporated in that fuel.

So I think that's the beginning. Beyond that, I think we can see steps and stags of further restrictions on enrichment.

One thing that I think is very important for us on the non-Iranian side, if I can raise it that way, is inspections and monitoring. Right now Iran is under a limited regime of inspections and monitoring. I think as you get going, and particularly as you can get advances on the process—and they would certainly pay heavily for us to recognize their continuing right to enrich even under limitations—we ought to find a way to improve, and indeed strengthen, the inspection process as we go ahead. That means with the IAEA; it means something called the Additional Protocol and some other arrangements that they have to be effective.

It seems to me that beginning that way is a start.

Now, we have had serious differences over the years on many things.

Regime change is certainly something the Iranian supreme leader is purportedly deeply concerned about. If I were supreme leader and I thought somebody was trying to change my regime, I would be concerned about it.

This is something that in many ways in my view is something we have little capacity to affect. Our past history at changing regimes has been pretty parlous. It's not something that we do very well. And besides, in the end, in Iran it's the people of Iran, even under that miserable system, that are going to have to decide where to take the regime. We ought to be in a position not at this point to introduce regime change as the kind of objective that will stand in the way of progress.

And indeed, I think while the Iranians would congenitally be unwilling to believe any professions of faith in the direction of no regime change, there are some things that we might do in terms of actions that could begin to help them build some confidence—maybe making clear to them that we are not helping internal parties in Iran who have carried a gun against them and tell them what we are doing to try to slow that down.

Those are examples of where to go.

I think that in connection with the nuclear discussions—perhaps not to be mixed up in them but certainly to help try to find a way to improve both the atmosphere and progress—we could talk about the future of Iraq, we could talk about the future of Afghanistan, and we could deal with some of their longstanding problems with the United States.

And we have some issues that we want on the table: the use of support for terrorist organizations, their intervention in the Middle East peace process—a lot of things that are there.

So we have a lot of air to clear and we have a lot of things out there and a lot of things that could form grist for the diplomatic mill.

Well, a lot of this is hard to pin down as to where it might go. But anybody who says there's nothing to negotiate about is wrong; anyone who says that over the years the Iranians have not made some useful proffers is wrong; anybody who says that they have always done exactly what we would hope is wrong. But all of those wrongs point to the fact, in my view, that there is still plenty of room to move ahead. I have suggested some ideas there.

My hope is that we can take the sanctions pressure and turn it into a useful start. It will require a lot of care, a lot of careful stepping, a lot of management of the rhetoric, and a lot of, I hope, air-clearing and hair-letting-down at the appropriate time in the diplomatic process as it goes ahead.

Thank you for your kind attention. I am ready to talk about anything else that you've got on your mind.

## Questions and Answers

**QUESTION:** Thank you so much for your presentation. I think it's fair to say no one makes the case for a diplomatic strategy and the urgency of it better than you do. So thank you.

The key take-away from your talk that I took was that there is time for diplomacy. We can probably have a big debate on how long we have, but there is a fair chunk of time.

So let's imagine you are back at the State Department and these few interesting developments that have happened over the past six weeks are now on your desk. What would be the key three or four things you would do quickly to implement that diplomatic strategy?

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I think we next have to nail down the time and the place. We have to get our own positions settled. What are we prepared to put on the table, particularly with respect to the TRR [Tehran Research Reactor] deal?

Would we be prepared, for example, which I think would be useful, for either the TRR deal or what I would call the extended TRR deal—that is, we get the 5 percent cap and we get the 20 percent material—to say that we would slow down the implementation of the CBI [Central Bank of Iran] sanctions and maybe persuade our European friends to wait a little while?

But I would in my own view then link that to the next steps. That is, we would stay in the room, and if we were able to get those next steps, we would then freeze the implementation or the non-implementation of those sanctions as long as they were prepared to come back for another stage, so that you would build step-by-step toward the various pieces that you have to put in place.

The next stage I think would be extremely interesting. There you might get a limit on expansion of the number of centrifuges, and maybe a limit on the amount of material that is produced, the low-enriched uranium. And then, maybe in some of these cases a standstill on the heavy water reactor so that you could see that.

I think at the same time we ought to look with them at other areas where we can work. Maybe the UN could be helpful there, that it could provide an envelope into which we could work, maybe the suggestion that the [secretary-general](#) could find some very senior, maybe former head of state, who could become the overseer of those talks.

I think it's very important for us to want to enrich the relationship by bringing all things to the table. But we have to be very careful that it doesn't allow us or them to over-complexify the process so in fact we suddenly end up not with a grand agenda, which as you know is a word that has always attracted me, but with a grand bargain in which we in fact can't do anything until we have settled everything.

**QUESTION:** Tyler Beebe.

Ambassador, I think I heard you correctly but I may not have. You seemed to imply that if Israel were to unilaterally attack the nuclear facilities in Iran that we would become part of the process inevitably. Is that really the case, though?

**THOMAS PICKERING:** Yes.

**QUESTIONER:** Thank you. Most definitive. But could you explain why?

**THOMAS PICKERING:** The "why" question is of course the appropriate one, and I understand.

The "why" question is that we are so closely identified with Israel, particularly in the Muslim world, and they will all believe that in fact, as they always have, we have every capacity to make Israel do our bidding anytime, anyplace, anywhere. The frustration with our "failure" to force Israel to make all the compromises in the peace negotiations is from their perspective endemic of the kind of relationship.

To some extent, the president's statement that Israel is a sovereign country and free to make its own decision on this issue is both a very useful threat against Iran, particularly if it is never carried out, and at the same time a kind of reaffirmation of the notion that while, in the belief of many people, we have every possibility—after all, Israel is heavily dependent upon us for assistance—we have every capacity to influence the outcome of their decision, we have failed to do so.

I hope that's helpful. I think that's the logic set and the way people would be thinking about it in many countries around the world, not just in the Muslim world.

**QUESTION:** Bob James. I'm a businessman here.

Are the U.S. aims in Iran and the Middle East identical, fairly similar, or quite different than those in Israel? And more specifically, how influential is AIPAC? And is the [Mearsheimer-Walt](#) position correct, fairly rational, or just quite wrong?

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I think there are pieces of Mearsheimer-Walt that obviously reflect where things really are. But I think there are pieces that have gone too far.

I was invited some years ago to review the book [[The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy](#)]. I decided it was a death trap. That's essentially what I feel.

I think AIPAC is very influential. Anybody who doubts that ought to go to Washington and join them in their annual meeting. And I think that they have had enormous success in promoting ideas.

While I don't want to go into this in excessive detail, my view is that they happen to represent one spectrum of Israeli views. They happen to be closer to the present ruling coalition, to the right wing or the right end of Israeli politics, and in many ways responsive to that view.

I go back to [Yitzhak Rabin](#), who in fact made a very public statement when he was prime minister in 1988 or 1989, saying that he wished AIPAC would listen to his government and not in a sense to his opposition, in terms of the views that they had taken on Israel. So I think that that's there.

Israel and the United States would certainly share a view that it would be a tragedy were Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon. I think we take that view for several reasons: (1) we are against the proliferation of nuclear weapons; (2) the president has declared himself in favor at least of an objective of getting rid of nuclear weapons; and (3) we all see in fact that a nuclear weapon could be a very dangerous instrument in the hands of Iran—not just to use against another state, where I think they would have to calculate that we would certainly operate our deterrent to support that in favor of our friends.

And the time will come, if we are not able to deal with this problem, military attack or no, we will have to undertake that posture to deal with the question; but a very, very bad idea because it is going to drive other people in the region in that direction.

We all know that the most significant equation in proliferation is the more people who have them, the more chances you have for accident and miscalculation. I think that that is also part of the logic—or the psycho-logic if you want—of the problem of dealing with nuclear weapons.

Now, we have other areas where we agree with Israel. We have areas where we don't agree with Israel, and they are quite ramified, and they have to do in many instances with the future of Israel in the region and the future of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state in the region.

We don't attempt to substitute our views for Israel's. But on the other hand, I can tell you that we have had numerous occasions in many occasions and we don't always agree.

**QUESTION:** Wade Greene, Rockefeller Family & Associates.

I was very impressed by your [tour d'horizon](#). A question you brought up a couple of times is the enrichment element. Is there evidence that our administration is somewhat open to putting that on the table as part of some diplomatic step, the 5 percent/20 percent element?

**THOMAS PICKERING:** Yes there is.

I referred to a speech that Secretary Clinton gave. I can't recall the exact formulation. It was carefully couched. But it opened the door by saying something like, "We are not opposed to, in the long term, an Iranian civil nuclear program which might include enrichment," or something of that sort. So it took it a little bit in that direction. I think that's helpful.

You know, were all things equal and we could stop enrichment, sure, it would make sense. It's much easier to



monitor and control; it's much easier to deal with. But the truth is that Iranians have had now four or five successful years of experience with enrichment. You're not going to take it out of their brain cages, and they know how to do it.

So, in effect, pretending that they don't and that you've stopped it, and that's the only true and realistic answer, is to put yourself beyond what I think is the capability of diplomacy to find an answer that may not be absolutely perfect, but has a very high chance of succeeding in creating what I call the firewall between the civil program and its misuse over that line in a military way. I think that's the objective.

I'll also tell you a story. In 1994, I was ambassador in Moscow. We had for some years been concerned about the Iranian program. The Iranian program then was essentially to have this reactor at Bushehr, and they were talking to the Russians. I got instructions, which I carried out loyally, to tell the Russians it was a bad idea.

The Russians said: "We know no reason why it's a bad idea, and besides, it's good business. But we'll make sure that it's proofed against proliferation by controlling the fuel."

I wrote back a cable and I said: "Gee, here again I was unsuccessful. But I have some advice for you: I think it's time for us to stop advocating"—we were advocating then no nuclear policy in Iran—"the two-years-ago policy and try to get out ahead. My view is we must get out ahead of where the Iranians are by doing everything we can, if we have to accept where they are now, to draw a line in the sand against what we would call our sensitive technologies, things that enrich uranium or things that can produce plutonium."

Of course, that must have gone into the circular file. I never even got the courtesy of a response. But ambassadors are paid big money and they're used to that. [Laughter]

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** But that's another story.

**THOMAS PICKERING:** That's another story.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Jeff Laurenti, Century Foundation.

Tom, first picking up on your last observation, if you could walk us through where the others of our P5-Plus-1 (the Russians, Chinese, and the Europeans) are. It is said that the French are particularly hardnosed on this, and the Russians and the Chinese have been skeptical about sanctions at various points.

And then, if you could reflect on whether there is any lesson to be learned from the 1998 [experiment](#) by the Clinton administration, in which you were serving, in what seems to be a somewhat analogous situation on Iraq—there were inspectors there, somewhat; we did want regime change; we weren't interested in negotiation particularly, or so it seemed, if it didn't lead to that; and we bombed the facilities that we thought were suspicious—and then what was the outcome? And does that have some lessons for policymakers today?

**THOMAS PICKERING:** Yes, Jeff, terrific questions. I think that it's important to see.

What I would say is that the UK is pretty close to us. I think that they may differ on a few things. They are not more permissive than we are, which is unusual for the UK, but that is probably a reflection of [David Cameron](#) and a conservative government.

I think the French are much tougher than we are. I think that is particularly [Sarko](#) [Sarkozy]. I'll leave you to judge what are likely to be the results of the French election. But I think with [Francois Hollande](#) we may have a partner who is closer in vision to us than with Sarko.

I think Mrs. [Merkel](#) is pretty close to us.

I think the Russians and the Chinese have accepted the notion (1) that the Iranians are causing us all problems; (2) I think for the Russians, who apparently didn't know about it, according to reports, Qom or Fordow was a real surprise. I think they have a very complicated and a very intricate relationship with Iran. They have lots of business possibilities. Iran is closer to them and closer to what they would like to consider to be a sphere of influence. So they handle Iran with a little more care. But I think in this one, unlike Syria, the Russians have a potential to be persuaded. I don't know how much further they go.

The Chinese in this particular case want to be no more pro-us than the Russians, but probably no less, which is a help. I think the Chinese, as you know, have had a very considerable redline in their policy against authorizing the use of force, particularly in the Security Council, although they had been prepared to permit it to happening by abstaining rather than vetoing. So one could look at that as a potential possibility.

And indeed, if we don't succeed in diplomacy, there is a much stronger argument with the Russians and the Chinese than if we don't use diplomacy to try to succeed, if I can put it that way. And so, therefore, that piece is I think very important in our relationship.

The Russians, as you know, have proposed their own plan. It's a plan that we have object to because it seemed to be too much sanctions relief before too little action on the part of Iranians. But it is also in my view something that we shouldn't reject and then walk away from and never come back to, because any plan anybody puts on the table that has elements that can be used is part of the grist for the diplomacy, to see whether in fact you can negotiate the other elements that you think need to be there in one way or another to move the process ahead.

Diplomacy is not the confrontation of mutual dicta; it's the opening of a door to begin to see whether you can move ahead. It is conceivable, but certainly not certain, that in effect the pressure of sanctions and other things have now brought us to the time when we certainly need to test the possibility of negotiations rather than allowing it to walk away from us.

**QUESTION:** Ambassador Pickering, my name is Iván Rebolledo with TerraNova Strategic Partners.

I would like to get your impression as to Iran's foray into Latin America. As you know, President [Ahmadinejad](#) has visited the region three times over the last two years. It's obviously to build alliances to poke at the United States. But do you see anything else in these visits to the region? Thank you.

**THOMAS PICKERING:** Well, I see it as an exercise—I don't like to say it this way— an exercise in bottom feeding. They haven't got many friends left. Choosing [Hugo Chávez](#), who I've had the honor of having diplomatic discussions with, is not my view of where you would want to start even if you were Iran. [Laughter]

I don't minimize that, and I think that they are mutually back-scratching and doing other things. But they tend to be a society on the outside of the international community, not a society on the inside.

I think Chávez's judgment is once again suspect if he believes in fact that he is going to enter into the ranks of the acceptable—which I think he would like to be; he'd like to be in the vanguard of the acceptable—by making a firm alliance or any kind of alliance with Iran. I think that in some ways that mutual self-identification of isolation is part of what we see going on.

I don't think this means that Hugo Chávez will stop shipping us oil, which is something we ought to consider—it's just too important. But it doesn't mean that if we stop taking his oil we can have an enormous influence in today's market, that is pushing up the price as we go ahead for other reasons.

I think the other players, [Morales](#) and [Correa](#) in Bolivia and Ecuador, are less central to the whole thing. They are sort of also-rans in this group of people who are more orbiting somewhere outside the present system than within it.

I think over the period of time the United States has handled them all well. The United States has not made a big issue—that's something they would like. They have not been victimized in their own views by the "colossus of the north." And the United States has not really paid attention to the Iranian connection there as a public matter of fact, in terms of ringing alarm bells and concern, for all the obvious reasons. I think we watch it carefully and I think we'll see where it goes.

The really interesting question is how long Hugo Chávez will be there and what things will happen. Venezuelan politics are particularly difficult and particularly complex—you may know better than I do—and the notion that we have successors on what I would call the more open democratic side of Venezuela is a real problem for the country. One would like to see that, but that doesn't seem to be appearing ready to hand.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Ambassador. My name is Karimi from the Mission of Iran to the United Nations.

Ambassador, this year is—

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I hope I've treated you reasonably. I'm sorry.

**QUESTIONER:** Thank you.

This year there is an election in the United States. Could you give your impression about the day after election here in the United States, either the policies are the same or you see any changes?

**THOMAS PICKERING:** Mr. Karimi, I'm delighted to see you, and thank you for coming.

My sense is the day after elections will be mightily determined by who wins. [Laughter] So if you can tell me who wins, I'll tell you what the relationships will be.

If President Obama were to win, he would have once again I think a reinforced opportunity to pursue what appears now to be in his heart, and which the supreme leader I think wisely recognized. My sense is that between now and then we will make every effort to see whether we can keep things on track and move them ahead.

By then, one would hope that we would have made some steps and that in effect this is a foregone conclusion that we will continue to move down this road. I wouldn't expect all issues to be taken care of by then, in all honesty.

I think if a Republican president comes in, he will have to consider very carefully the importance of this situation, as opposed to the rhetorical opportunity that has been taken to beat up on the president in the course of the elections.

We have numerous examples of this in American political life. The most famous one is, of course, connected with your region, and that's the move-the-American-Embassy-from-Tel-Aviv-to-Jerusalem example. Almost everybody who runs in an American political race, if he or she is not the president, adopts immediately the notion that the embassy should be moved post haste, even to a tent in a field in Jerusalem. And then, of course, the day after they get elected they consider the problem, they are told what the consequences will be, and this suddenly disappears from the landscape.

Now, whether all of that would happen or not I don't know. But presidents change as they take office because they have to contemplate the consequences of their verbiage. For them the consequences of their verbiage before election is to achieve the holy grail—get elected.

After that there is a reasonable amount of tolerance for American presidents changing their view, particularly if they adopt a view that has been considered wisdom for some time. Let us hope that this idea of trying to work out this question will be considered wisdom.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Raymond Karam from the EastWest Institute.

Ambassador, we always talk about Israel as the driver of U.S. policy towards Iran. But maybe you could talk about the role of Saudi Arabia especially in some kind of "grand agenda" that you have alluded to.

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I don't consider Israel a driver; I consider Israel, however, a very large influence—and there's a difference. I think the president indicated what's driving him when he spoke to AIPAC.

I think that Saudi Arabia is interesting, because, in effect, Saudi Arabia, from what I see and hear—I have not been directly any participant in this—is very disturbed by Iran and where Iran is going.

But Saudi Arabia has always practiced a policy of what I would call engagement, rather than disengagement, wherever it can, with the possible exception, of course, that we know about of Israel.

So Saudi Arabia has frequently exchanged visits at high levels with Iran, and Iranians have visited Saudi Arabia. It doesn't necessarily mean that they are locked in a forever embrace, but it does mean at least that on the superficial level they are prepared to talk. This is important—not that the superficialities are widely acceptable, but it means that they have access and an opportunity to each other to deal with these kinds of issues.

And while there have been differences between Saudi Arabia and Iran—many differences—the Iranians and the Saudi Arabians appeared at least to try to want to manage those. In my view, the management of differences is what diplomacy is about. In my view, it isn't necessarily going to solve everything right away, but it is still, in the words of [Winston Churchill](#), a lot better than war-war.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Tom, if I may be permitted the final question—often the moderator takes the right to ask the first question. I'll ask the last one if I may.

**THOMAS PICKERING:** If that's a promise, you can.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** It is indeed. Time's a-wasted, as we say in the South.

**THOMAS PICKERING:** Let's get speedy. [Laughter]

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** You won't drop this, will you?

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I won't, no. It's too delicious, David. [Laughter]

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** It's a good thing we're friends.

So much of the argument here focuses on Iran's attentions, focuses on our options, and of course so much has focused on the nuclear question.

Talk a little bit about, from your viewpoint, Iran's other interests, what we ought to be taking into account, in terms of—obviously Iran's quite understandable sense of regional presence; its concern about Afghanistan, the narcotics issue, for example. From their viewpoint, what do you see that ought to be on the table?

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I think that regime change is a very big interest. You've named a couple of others that I

think are high on their list. They have to be the arbiters of their own view on it.

But from what I've gathered from the way people have talked, certainly the drugs question is very serious. They say they lost 3,600 people just in trying to keep their border closed to the passage of drugs from Afghanistan. And they are discouraged, as a lot of people are discouraged, that our policy in Afghanistan of necessity has not been able to solve the drug issue, that too much early eradication produces recruits for the Taliban.

Providing alternative cropping patterns for the future of Afghanistan has been a hugely difficult issue, and to some extent it has taken second and third place in our priorities, and as a result Afghanistan—and, interestingly enough, if you go to Moscow with the intention of talking about Afghanistan, the first place they make you go is to talk to their drug czar. So they have a very serious concern about that question.

I think we have the question of future stability in Iraq and where it is to go and how it is to be dealt with. I think that there is every reason to make it clear that there is neither a threat from Iraq to Iran, but I think on our side we would like to know Iranian intentions and how they intend to deal with Iraq.

There is a closeness, but there is also traditionally extreme tension between Persians and Arabs at times over questions and issues in the region. My own view is we should be careful not to exploit that. That drives things.

I think that we have a feeling—and we may be wrong—that Iran would like recognition of its important place in the region.

On the other hand, it is not up to the United States to decide who and how the question of relationships in the region are managed—or, indeed, who sits higher on the table, if I could put it that way, than others.

On the other hand, it is I think a natural development of the region in which Iran has to play a role, if we could look at it this way, that Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq will be three of the most important players in the region of the Persian Gulf, and others may join. It is in my view very important that consultative—and, indeed, cooperative—mechanisms over time can replace the situation which we have now, which is near-hostility and certainly deeply held and important structural differences that I don't think are immutable or necessarily can't be developed.

To some extent, it has been this nagging problem, the U.S. and Iran, over the nuclear question, and maybe on the Iranian side the regime change question, that has sort of put the whole thing into a kind of diplomatic stasis or, worse, a diplomatic degeneration. One has to see whether in fact this is yet again another opportunity.

A very good Iranian friend of mine who has played an important role in Iranian foreign policy over the years has said that "The historical record shows that every time we have been ready, you have not been, and every time you have been ready, we have not been." Maybe we are in that star-crossed position that, even with some small things, we can begin to bring the curves of interest together rather than have them cross apart.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** On that uplifting note . . . You promised grist for the mill, and you've provided an abundance. For that we thank you very sincerely.

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