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Talking to Iran Is Not So Controversial

DON'T LOOK NOW BUT THERE IS A BROAD CONSENSUS ON WHAT THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION SHOULD DO ABOUT IRAN.

BY: Ilan Goldenberg

If two years ago you were to tell me that the Democratic presidential nominee would make engaging with Iran a central element of his campaign, I would have thought you were joking. After all, talking to a country that has historically enjoyed a favorability rating of a whopping 10 percent in the United States and has a president known for his anti-Western rhetoric probably isn't going to be all that popular. Not to mention the fact that the most substantive interaction Americans have had with Iran over the last 30 years involved watching blindfolded hostages and burning American flags on their television screens.

Yet incredibly, in a feat that defies conventional wisdom, Barack Obama is more than just holding his own against John McCain. When it comes to Iran he has the American public and most foreign-policy experts squarely behind him.

Obama's position is that we should be willing to engage in direct talks with the Iranian regime and offer them a choice: greater economic incentives and regular diplomatic relations in exchange for greater cooperation or economic sanctions and political isolation for their intransigence. John McCain and President Bush both argue that the United States should only talk to

Iran if it first agrees to the precondition of suspending its uranium-enrichment program. Essentially, they are demanding that Iran give up its most significant bargaining chip before even sitting down at the table. In the meantime, McCain has called for more robust sanctions and has continued the Bush administration's pattern of saber rattling -- even jokingly singing about "bomb, bomb, bombing" Iran.

Americans support the idea of dealing directly with the Iranian regime. A recent Gallup poll found that despite extremely low opinions of Iran, 59 percent believe it's a good idea for the president to meet with the Iranian leadership. A **Public Agenda/Foreign Affairs** poll taken this spring found that 47 percent of Americans believed that establishing better relations with Iran through diplomacy was the one best way for the United States to deal with Iran while 40 percent supported economic sanctions, military threats or military action. This represented a 21 point swing from the fall of 2007 when only 35 percent supported diplomatic talks as the best option and 49 percent argued for more aggressive policies.

Meanwhile, experts and former government officials from across the political spectrum are also

coming to the conclusion that direct talks must be part of a comprehensive strategy. The bipartisan Iraq Study Group Report that included former Secretaries of State James Baker and Laurence Eagleburger, both Republicans, argued in December 2006 that the United States should engage Iran on the question of Iraq. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Adm. Michael Mullen, recently stated that he "would like to have a healthy dialogue with Iran." At a recent conference hosted by the centrist Center for New American Security (CNAS), Jim Dobbins, who worked with the Iranians when he was leading U.S. negotiating efforts after the war in Afghanistan, Dennis Ross, who served as special envoy to the Middle East during the Clinton Administration, and Suzanne Maloney, who was on the State Department's policy planning staff working Iran issues from 2005 to 2007, all agreed that direct talks should be an important component of U.S. strategy.

This consensus further reinforces a new CNAS report arguing that the Bush administration's continued emphasis on using military threats as leverage is actually making any diplomatic breakthrough less likely. Richard Haas, who has served in a number

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of Republican administrations and is currently the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, also supports direct talks and even a neoconservative like Robert Kagan, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has argued that talks are a good idea. (Although admittedly he believes that they will likely fail, and that the outcome will be greater international support for harsher measures against the Iranian regime.)

A number of factors account for the growing consensus on Iran. First, the Iraq War has dramatically changed the country's views on the use of force. Polling over the past few years has shown a reduction in the number of Americans who see military force as the most effective tool for keeping America safe and a related increase in support for diplomacy. Before the invasion the public was led to believe that that the war would be quick, easy and cheap. But with more than 4,100 American casualties, approximately 30,000 wounded, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis dead, and direct costs alone topping \$500 billion Americans have been reminded that war is hard, expensive, and unpredictable, and that the use of military force should only be seen as a last resort.

In addition to Iraq, the absolute failure of our Iran policy has also caused people to reconsider. The Bush administration has refused to engage with Iran at a senior level until it suspends its uranium-enrichment program. In the meantime, Iran has gone from zero to 3,000 nuclear centrifuges. Freed

from its two greatest local rivals -- Saddam Hussein and the Taliban -- it has expanded its influence into Iraq, Afghanistan and across the Middle East. The supposedly tough sanctions that would dissuade the Iranian government have failed to materialize since the Russians and Chinese have offered little support for the types of economic measures that would inflict genuine pain on the Iranian regime. And there is general agreement that bombing Iran's nuclear facilities would only cause a temporary delay in its uranium-enrichment program, while guaranteeing that the regime would react by moving beyond its current civilian nuclear program and develop a bomb.

Given these bad options, the choice is no longer between engaging in direct diplomacy and trying to pressure Iran through military and economic coercion to give up its nuclear program. We must now decide between allowing Iran to continue to work against American interests, move closer toward becoming a nuclear power and increase its influence across the region, and trying to engage. Engaging in direct talks does not mean giving in to Iranian demands. But through engagement we can make our own positions clear to the Iranians and work with them on common interests. This policy of talking directly in combination with economic inducements and threats may convince the Iranian regime to bring its nuclear program under an international verification regime with the goal of it eventually being eliminated. In essence the choice

has become doing nothing or trying something.

Finally, there is the question of leadership, and here Barack Obama deserves much credit for moving the conversation. When Obama first made the statement last year about direct talks with Iran it was seen as a gaffe to be taken advantage of by his Democratic rivals. But his position actually turned into an advantage in the Democratic primary. Now Obama is sticking to his guns against McCain and so far it seems to be working. It's hard to imagine that the 21-point swing on this issue over the past few months is not at least partially due to the fact that the man who may currently have the most powerful bully pulpit in the country is out there aggressively making the case for talks.

Obama's zealous advocacy has undoubtedly had an impact in the beltway as well. Foreign-policy experts factor political will into their recommendations and try not to take positions that are completely unachievable. But Obama's position has blown through the assumption that talking directly to Iran is domestically unworkable. It's also signaled to experts in think tanks around Washington that they need to start thinking carefully about exactly how the United States would conduct diplomacy with Iran because it's clear that an Obama administration will likely ask for advice on this particular question.

In the end, we should be careful not to expect too much too soon from diplomatic overtures toward Iran. Thirty years worth of grievances will not be solved



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overnight and the Iranian regime is still playing a malign role in Iraq, supporting Hezbollah and Hamas and building a uranium-enrichment capability.

But let's not fool ourselves into thinking that diplomatic engagement with Iran is some kind of controversial fringe progressive idea. In reality, it is the consensus position. It is John McCain's and George Bush's stubborn insistence of continuing a failed policy that is out of touch.

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