

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Senator Richard G. Lugar
Opening Statement for Hearing on U.S. Strategy with Iran
March 5, 2009

I join in welcoming former National Security Advisors Zbigniew Brzezinski and General Brent Scowcroft. Both are good friends of this committee. They have been generous with their time and counsel on foreign policy issues in the past. I look forward to their views on Iran.

On Tuesday the Committee heard testimony from four distinguished foreign policy experts. They provided helpful analysis of the policy options available to the United States in responding to the threats posed by Iran.

The U.S. agenda with Iran involves numerous issues including its nuclear program, its support for terrorist organizations, its relevance to our efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, its threat to the security of Israel, its impact on stability in the Persian Gulf region, its status as an energy exporter, its relationship with Shi'ite communities in the Middle East, and prospects for long term improvements in the U.S.-Iranian relationship.

Although all of these issues are interconnected, concerns about Iran's nuclear program have understandably dominated discourse, given the risks and consequences of proliferation and the uncertain status of Iran's nuclear program. Potential leverage stemming from the economic stress on Iran caused by the drop in world oil prices and the fresh start provided by the Obama government also contribute to the sense that the time is ripe for a concerted multilateral effort to constrain Iran's nuclear program.

Our hearing on Tuesday provided an opportunity to examine such questions as to whether the Iranian government can be induced to limit its nuclear program; what set of multilateral sanctions and incentives might achieve this goal, and whether success would likely require recognition of a limited Iranian right to enrich. There was broad agreement that restraining Iran's nuclear ambitions would require greater cooperation with allies and partners, most of whom have commercial interests with Iran and independent views about the Tehran regime. This leads to such questions as what compromises should we be willing to make in our approach to Iran to ensure a tightly unified coalition? And should the United States make explicit to the Chinese and Russians that cooperation on Iran is at the very top of our agenda with those nations?

Beyond Iran's nuclear program, the United States government should also be preparing a strategy for engaging Iran on other issues. Such engagement should not undercut multilateral efforts on the nuclear question. Rather, it should seek to establish communication that can avoid miscalculations, open up the possibility of cooperation on points of agreement, and facilitate information flowing to the Iranian people.

Last year, when Undersecretary of State Bill Burns joined representatives of the other P-5+1 governments in a meeting with the Iranian nuclear negotiator, it signaled a shift in U.S. policy. But we still have not established a clear course of action on bilateral engagement. Some suggest that the first step should be a low-level meeting between U.S. and Iranian officials that would set the parameters for future discussions. Others argue that a public, top-down approach that clarifies ambiguities and sets the context for subsequent discussions is preferable. Both Dr. Brzezinski and General Scowcroft have deep experience in constructing these types of strategies. I am hopeful that they will offer thoughts about how a potential U.S.-Iranian dialogue could begin and how it should be structured.

Lastly, I would ask our witnesses to comment on the advisability and timing of opening a U.S. visa office or interests section in Iran. I support establishing a modest diplomatic presence in Iran. Such an outpost would facilitate more exchange and outreach with the Iranian people and improve our ability to interpret what is going on in Iran.

I thank the Chairman and look forward to today's testimony.

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