

Iran Appears Ready for Nuke Deal

Behind the scenes, diplomacy appears to be making slow progress toward a resolution of the Iranian-nuclear stalemate, possibly early in the new year. But obstacles remain and they are mostly in Washington, say Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett at RaceforIran.com.

By Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett

We are just back from another visit to the Islamic Republic and see even more clearly that the real obstacles to successful nuclear diplomacy with Iran lie in Washington, not Tehran. Prior to our visit, we outlined several of the reasons for this in an extended [interview](#) on Ian Masters' *Background Briefing* about our forthcoming book, [Going to Tehran](#).

We open by taking issue with the conventional wisdom that the upcoming talks between the P5+1 and Iran will be the "last chance" to reach a nuclear deal with Tehran before the Islamic Republic gears up for its presidential election next year.

On this point, Flynt notes that the only reason nuclear talks over the next few months would be a "last chance" is "because of arbitrary deadlines and frameworks that the United States and some of its partners have imposed on these negotiations.

In the end, the Iranian nuclear problem is actually quite simple: if the United States was prepared to accept Iran's right to enrich uranium, under safeguards, on its own territory, you could have a deal in fairly short order.

"You could probably get limits on Iran's 20-percent enrichment, you could get much more intrusive verification on its nuclear activities. But you would have to accept the Islamic Republic as kind of a normal state, with legitimate interests and rights."

The Obama administration, of course, has shown no willingness to approach nuclear talks with Iran on such a basis. Instead, it has imposed the arbitrary deadlines and frameworks highlighted by Flynt. The dysfunctionality of this approach is reinforced by deeply flawed, and self-deluding, assessments of Iranian decision-making.

As Hillary explains, "The anxiety here, or the urgency, is because it's put out that, if we don't do something now, if we don't try to make a deal now, the Iranian elections will come and that will somehow derail any possibility for talks. This is something that, time and time again, permeates the American

debate, that somehow the problem with negotiating with Iran is in Iran, is in Tehran.

“It’s either the ‘mad mullahs’ are so crazy, so irrational that we can’t count on them to negotiate like a rational state, or various things are going to come up in their calendar, particularly elections (which in itself should make us question this idea that there are ‘mad mullahs’ there)

“The whole debate here [in Washington] is that something is wrong in Iran, something is wrong in Tehran that is going to derail talks. There’s never any examination of what drives American politics to demonize countries like the Islamic Republic of Iran. The issue is something here; it’s about domestic politics here.

“If President Obama cannot get a negotiation going with the Iranians in the next few months, he has a problem domestically here, because domestic constituencies here, and the Israeli government, will say, ‘Time is up. You’ve had enough time. We can’t let the Iranians continue to progress in their nuclear program. You have to take even more coercive action, either more coercive sanctions or military action.’

“It’s a domestic problem here. It’s not because of something going on in the decision-making or some irrational craziness among Iranian clerics or Iranian lay leaders.”

On Israel’s role, and its motives for constantly pushing an alarmist view of the Islamic Republic, Flynt says, “The Israelis are perpetually concerned, I think that their concern is exaggerated, but they are perpetually concerned that the Obama administration is going to try, in a serious way, to pursue a deal.

“Because the Israelis know that the only kind of deal you could really get out of this process that would have any meaning for both sides would be a deal that actually recognized Iran’s right to enrich, again, under safeguards, not building a nuclear weapon, but they do have a right to enrich.

“That’s what the Israelis are out to stop. They do not want the United States, other Western powers, to accept this basic fact of international law and international life, that the Iranians have this right, and they are not going to be bullied into giving it up.

“This is something that I think the United States really has to come to terms with. For its own interests, it needs to get a nuclear deal with Iran; it needs to start realigning its relations with this important country in the Middle East.

“And we need to be able to separate Israeli preferences, that have more to do with [Israel’s] own commitment to military dominance in the Middle East, and Israeli security. Iran enriching uranium under safeguards doesn’t affect Israeli security at all. But we need to be able to sort out what our real interests are.”

Against the stereotypes of Iranian “irrationality” and internal political divisions that render effective diplomatic engagement with Tehran impossible, Hillary outlines some important realities about the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy and national security strategy:

“There is consensus [among Iranian policymakers] that Iran should and can engage with almost any country in the world, if [engagement] is to protect its own interests. Where it draws the line is anywhere that Iran would be asked to or expected to cede any of its sovereign rights. Iran is not going to agree to that kind of negotiation.

“In terms of what Iran should push for, what kind of deal Iran could make in the end, there is certainly discussion and debate, vociferous debate, in Iran about those kinds of tactics. But the strategy, that Iran is a strong country, that it can and should negotiate and deal with other countries in its own interests, is something that is really put forward by the Supreme Leader, by Ayatollah Khamenei. And it’s something, I think, that every senior official follows

“You hear in Washington, especially, periodic discussion some days it’s Ahmadinejad is the hardliner and he would never be able to deal with the United States. And then someone points out, ‘Well, he actually wrote a 20-page letter to Bush. He actually wrote a congratulatory letter to President Obama on his first election.’

“Then people say, ‘Well, maybe the issue is really the speaker of the parliament, or maybe it’s this person or that person.’ There’s a constant attempt in the United States, particularly in Washington, to read the tea leaves, as if [the Islamic Republic is] a very opaque system. These kinds of critics analogize it to the Soviet system.

“But it’s not really opaque. If you listen, read, talk to [Iranian] officials, talk to a range of people in their political class, on their political spectrum, and take what they have to say seriously you can really understand their strategy. You can understand where they’re coming from, and their strategic determination to be a very strong, independent country.

“The problem, I think, on our side, why we try always to see where there’s some daylight, where this person is competing with that person, is that we’re very

reluctant to accept that Iran could be a strong, independent, not secular, not liberal, but still legitimate political entity.

“We document rather exhaustively in our book the number of times that the Iranians have engaged with the United States. [In one of these episodes, I] worked personally with them as an official in the State Department and in the White House, with a small team of American officials, to deal with Afghanistan and the problem we were facing there after 9/11 with *Al-Qa’ida*

“[The Iranians] were not paralyzed by internal conflict. The internal conflict was here. It’s the opposition that I had when I was in the White House, from my superiors or people who worked for Vice President Cheney, trying to undermine what Ryan Crocker and I were trying to do with the Iranians.”

Looking ahead, Flynt underscores that, notwithstanding recurrent debate among American political and policy elites over Tehran’s willingness to talk directly, on a bilateral basis, with Washington, “the Iranian position on dealing with the United States has been pretty clear and consistent for a long time, for years. They are open to improved relations, they are open to dialogue and diplomacy to facilitate serious improvement in relations.

“But they want to know, upfront at this point, that the United States is really prepared to accept the Islamic Republic as a legitimate political order representing legitimate national interests. And they want to know upfront that the United States is really serious about realigning relations with them.

“They are not interested in having negotiations just for the sake of having negotiations. They are not interested in having negotiations if they think that the United States is just going to keep piling sanctions on them. They want to know upfront that the United States is serious.

“So they will go the P-5+1 talks; they certainly are not refusing to participate in the P-5+1 process. And if, as part of that, the United States makes it clear that it really is interested in a different sort of relationship, that it really does accept the Islamic Republic and wants to come to terms with it as an important player in the Middle East, at that point the Iranians would be very open, very receptive to bilateral dialogue.”

In the interview, we also discuss the 2003 non-paper sent to Washington by Iran *via* Swiss intermediaries and why incremental, step-by-step cooperation between the United States and the Islamic Republic doesn’t work to improve the overall relationship (mainly because Washington won’t allow it to do so).

Flynt Leverett served as a Middle East expert on George W. Bush’s National Security Council staff until the Iraq War and worked previously at the State

Department and at the Central Intelligence Agency. Hillary Mann Leverett was the NSC expert on Iran and from 2001 to 2003 was one of only a few U.S. diplomats authorized to negotiate with the Iranians over Afghanistan, al-Qaeda and Iraq. [This article was originally published at RaceforIran.com. For direct link, click:

<http://www.raceforiran.com/the-real-obstacles-to-successful-nuclear-diplomacy-with-iran-lie-in-washington-not-tehran>
