

**Transcript of Remarks made by Barbara Slavin  
June 26, 2006 – “Iran Under President Ahmadinejad”**

*The following remarks were made by Barbara Slavin in connection with her participation in the conference entitled “Iran Under President Ahmadinejad,” which was held at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars on June 26, 2006. The opinions expressed here are those of the speaker and in no way represent the views or opinions of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.*

First I want to thank Haleh Esfandiari, Mike Van Dusen, Lee Hamilton and the Wilson Center for giving me a whole three months to actually think about Iran and work on a book here. It's a brief amount of time, but I tell you, for a journalist, three months is heaven. It's really been great to go through all my old notebooks and challenge some of my preconceptions and really think about Iran and its policies and what they mean. Luckily for me just on the day before I turned into a pumpkin, Condoleezza Rice announced that the United States was making a 180-degree turn in foreign policy and agreeing to talk in the same room with the Iranians about the nuclear issue. This was very startling to a number of people. But it was really the logical result of a change in thinking that the administration had gone through since the second Bush Administration began.

I think the first Bush term you would have to characterize as one of incoherence on the Iranian issue. You had tremendous divisions between factions within our administration that prevented any rational policy from being put forward. You had the State Department kind of sneaking around the edges and continuing discussions with the Iranians, such as on Afghanistan, when clearly that was in their mutual interest. You had discussions that led to talks about Iraq in 2002 and early 2003, but running alongside this trend you had the regime-change crowd very actively trying to prevent any real reconciliation or rapprochement between the two countries.

The emphasis switched, as you all know, to Iraq, and the belief and the feeling in the Bush Administration was that they would take care of Iraq; and then Iran, like a ripe persimmon, would drop into regime change and follow the democratic trends. I see Flynt Leverett here in the audience. He, of course, first wrote about an initiative by the Iranians in April-May 2003 which was not taken up by the Bush Administration partly because of objectionable Iranian behavior, which we can talk about, and partly because of this overconfidence that Iraq was going to be easy and that the demonstration effect would have an enormous impact on Iran and Iran's domestic politics. Meanwhile, the Iranian nuclear program had been suspended by talks with the Europeans.

[With the] second Bush term the Europeans were clearly running out of steam and I think where we can see the trend line that led to Condoleezza Rice's announcement on May 31st was when President Bush went to Europe last year, decided to try and improve relations with the Europeans, and was asked for bigger carrots to put on the table in order to have any hope that the Iranians would accept some sort of negotiated permanent suspension of the enrichment program [and] of the fuel cycle program. So Bush, under pressure from Condoleezza Rice and Nick Burns, the very capable Under Secretary for

Political Affairs, agreed to do two things that the Iranians had been talking about for a long time. First, stop blocking Iran's efforts to join the World Trade Organization, and secondly agree to supply spare parts and let Europeans supply spare parts (that had American content) for Iran's airliners. Very important issues, both for the Iranians. But, the Iranians, as they so often do, pocketed these concessions, said "Thank you very much, what more can we see?" Meanwhile, the suspension continued. There was a lot of grumbling [and] a lot of public pressure from neoconservatives within Iran, more hawkish elements, who wanted to resume their nuclear work. One might argue that they were continuing some of their research and development quietly and they had reached a stage where they needed to actually test and see whether their centrifuges would actually function or whether they would all crash. So you had increased frustration with the EU-3 negotiations [and] a sense that those were coming to an end last summer. Even before the Europeans presented their own proposal in August of 2005, the Iranians were basically saying they were going to reject it out of hand. There was a sense that the Europeans lacked the carrots and they were not willing to put forward the sticks that would give this initiative any chance.

This is where Ahmadinejad comes in. I think it's really coincidental. It was useful for the Iranian regime to have him there as a hawkish element, because the decision had already been made to resume the nuclear work. And we had what Bob Einhorn over at a rival think-tank calls "salami tactics" - the Iranians took a little slice in August of 2005 when they resumed converting raw uranium into uranium hexafluoride gas and they took a big chunk of the salami off in January when they restarted the program in Natanz to actually enrich uranium.

So this is where Bush Administration thinking began to evolve in a more significant way. We have a couple of factors here. First, the recognition that regime change was not going to happen. I think there may be a few Richard Perles out there who think this is still likely and Iran is going to change just like that, but Iran had the election of Ahmadinejad. It had many contradictory elements to it - the most hawkish element won, but it was also an election that had probably the liveliest campaigning that Iran has ever seen. The regime clearly wasn't going to collapse. Another factor was that the administration was hearing increasingly from the Europeans and from a number of influential Americans that they had to talk to the Iranians. This was beginning to be ridiculous. After all, we had the precedent of the United States taking part in talks with North Korea. Not very effective talks, one might argue, but still sitting in the same room. Why would Iran somehow be different? How would Iran be worse than the regime of Kim Jong Il? And I think the third factor was Iran itself. Iranians were talking more and more about wanting to have talks with the United States. Messages were being sent, starting early this year. One could argue that this was because the Iranians began to worry that they really were going to be taken to the Security Council and it was a defensive measure in part. But you had a consolidation of conservative forces in the Iranian regime. The reformers would no longer get credit for any rapprochement. So you had these three factors - regime change wasn't going to happen, more and more people were urging (particularly the Germans and Angela Merkel who President Bush seems to like and respect) urging him to talk to the Iranians and third you had the overtures.

So far I would argue that the changes in policy on both sides have been largely tactical. We're not yet in a strategic phase, certainly not yet in a Nixon-to-China phase. I don't know who the Nixon is, whether it is Ahmadinejad or its President Bush. We may not get there. It may be too late, in some ways. The administration may feel too nervous and constrained to really enter into a strategic dialogue with the Iranians. But it is possible that we may get there. The Bush Administration has acted so far to shore up a very fragile international consensus against the Iranian nuclear program. As Gerd pointed out, the evidence is not completely clear as to what the Iranians are doing. There are certainly a lot of suspicions. The IAEA is not pleased with Iranian conduct. They have a lot of questions that they want answered about Iranian behavior, but there is no smoking gun, as Gerd pointed out. The United States also doesn't have a viable military option right now not as long as it has almost 130,000 troops in Iraq. It needs to buy time. If it's possible to get the Iranians to suspend the program again, then time is on the side of the United States and its European allies. The way things are now, time is on the Iranians' side. They're continuing to work on the program [and] they're continuing to learn more about how to make uranium fuel.

The Iranians, I'd argue, are also acting tactically at this point. They began making these overtures when they realized that they really were going to be taken to the Security Council. They are clearly trying to buy time now, when President Ahmadinejad says he's going to wait until almost the end of August to reply to this offer. We'll see how much time he's going to get. I think the Bush Administration is going to start pushing again in the Security Council for a movement on a resolution if it doesn't hear back from the Iranians soon. I would predict that the Iranians are going to make a counterproposal just before the UN is supposed to take up a Chapter 7 Resolution. This counterproposal will argue again in favor of keeping some kind of symbolic uranium enrichment program and we will have negotiations about negotiations that will probably carry us through the summer.

I think we're in for an interesting period. I would argue that the military option is not off the table. I think it still is there before this president leaves office, but it's going to depend on whether the negotiating track can really open with the Iranians and [on] the situation in Iraq. And with that, I'll leave it.