

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

The following remarks were made by Gerd Nonneman in connection with his 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.

Well thank you, Abbas Maleki, because my brief was fairly broad initially: “Iranian Foreign Policy: A European Perspective” of sorts. One of the key things I can now dispense with is [that] the range of Iranian foreign policy interests of course has changed and has broadened, and I can also dispense, to a large extent, with the economic drivers of interests. So I will say a few things about the drivers of Iranian foreign policy in general and then how it affects the nuclear question, and at the same time say a few things about the European angle. I can’t do more than give a few brief sketch-like points, and then hopefully we can pursue things in the discussion. Maybe let’s say something about the European bit first.

Here is a European based in the UK giving a European view. I’m not claiming to represent European views generally, of which there are many and some more coherent than others. But any rate, for what it’s worth, I have actually done some work in the last few years specifically on European relations with the Middle East - “European” of course meaning both individual countries and the EU as such. Okay, a few basics. For starters, “Europe,” however defined, is different from the United States in terms of its location, vis-à-vis, Iran. It’s very much closer and that has an effect not just in any objective sense but also for the way in which Europeans generally perceive Iran. Geographical proximity brings particular security concerns. But this also already points to one danger of stereotyping European approaches: depending on where you are in Europe, your geographical position is going to be different, hence your interests and your perception of Iran is going to be different. Second, there are very direct economic interests, in terms of markets, in terms of gas supply because Europe, as you all know, is far more dependent on external energy supplies than is the U.S. Third point very briefly, the pattern of relations between Europe and Iran is quite distinct from that of the United States and Iran. The pattern has been one of engagement, by and large, punctuated by moments of crisis. At the moment, we’ve just gone through a bit of a crisis; but the pattern, I think, is that continuing engagement will dominate, which arguably is the opposite of what the U.S. relations with Iran have gone through.

A few more points about Europe before we move onto Iran proper. The first is that it is many countries; there’s no one observation that can be made about Europe as such and you have different interests and different views. The second is that within each of these countries there are differences as well, which shouldn’t be a surprise if you look at the current debates going on within the U.S. about Iran policy. The third is that, again resembling what’s happening in the U.S., [there is] a lack of clear conclusive evidence and intelligence about what’s going on in Iran. The fourth is something about the EU as

an institution because very often when people talk about Europe as a foreign policy actor, they are really talking about the EU, which is a mistake. The EU as an institution is one *part* of the European picture. The problem with the EU as a mechanism of foreign policy is that it is very weak. The EU is really two things: it's the EC (European Community) that includes all the economic external relations. That's very strong and very developed. [The] CFSP (Common Foreign and Security Policy) is the other bit. And that remains very weak and divided. Even if it now has a High Representative for Foreign policy in Javier Solana, it suffers from these various interests not having been reconciled - and they won't be any time soon, either. Now the Iran case is interesting because that's where we've had an ad-hoc arrangement - the so-called "EU3" or the "E3/EU" because the negotiations between "Europe" and Iran over the nuclear file were not initially run by the EU at all. The fact is there were three countries, the "Big 3," who decided amongst themselves that this would be a good idea: to break through the logjam [and] to break through the problems of CFSP. And it was then quickly garbed in an EU dress, to the persistent dissatisfaction of lots of other EU countries, it has to be said. But nevertheless, [the plan was] quite successful and it's now diplomatically represented as E3/EU.

There are two final points to be made about Europe and its relations with Iran. One is that the experience of the Iraq war has seriously affected the way this whole problem is currently being treated. There's an additional layer of caution that's built in. And the final one is of course the U.S. factor, which has been exacerbated by the Iraq experience. There is still an element of wariness of the U.S. in some parts of the European policy elite, and on the other hand of course there's a contradictory trend of realization that one has to or one ought to go along with U.S. preferences.

So let's now turn to Iran as seen by, as I said, one European. Even though I've indicated that there is no clear European policy and there are all sorts of problems with the EU as an active in foreign policy, etc, nevertheless, I think it is fair to say that at least in some parts of Europe perhaps there is a bit of a better handle on things Iranian than there has been in the U.S., and this is largely to do with the fact that Europeans have had better access to Iran since the Revolution (access which was only briefly interrupted at times). Secondly, since the 1990s and the 2000s, there was this critical dialogue and then there was the comprehensive dialogue which all made for a lot of contact [and] a lot of personal links being built up. Specifically, the negotiations of the nuclear file with the E3/EU again have fed into a sense that one has somewhat of a better handle of what's going on in Iran. Even so, having said that, and having talked to some of the European commission officials who were directly involved with a lot of these negotiations, it's fair to say, I think, that very often they were going into them like this [fingers crossed] or they were coming out of the negotiations like that, just hoping and praying that they were going to have a deal that was going to stick and never being too sure about the outcome.

So what about the drivers of Iranian foreign policy including on nuclear issues? This is not going to be anything new for you so I can be very brief. First, Iran has a very, very long history. Now that has a dual impact: on the one hand, there's a sense of pride and the fact and the perceived right of being an important regional power; on the other hand, of course, that long experience also includes a lot of experience of invasion, external

intervention, etc. which has colored the foreign policy culture. Most specifically and more recently, it's the Iran-Iraq war that's affected and has colored perceptions. And it's not just a question of perceptions in a vague sense; it's very specific. The defensive capacity of Iran was severely diminished by that war. They saw the Iraqis using chemical weapons. Under the subsequent sanctions regime, on top of it all, Iran has found itself falling behind in terms of conventional weapons in a regional and global context in which they felt they needed them. Its regional neighborhood is not just one of economic opportunities; it is one of threats, and [in addition to] the problems hinted at by Abbas, fear of instability and Sunni radicalism emerging in the region in various ways. That uncertain threatening neighborhood (a little bit further afield of course you have Israel) explains some of the fears and some of the drivers of Iranian foreign and defense policy. If you combine that with this falling behind in conventional weapons, you can understand why they would be interested in acquiring and developing a surface-to-surface missile capability and perhaps a discussion about nuclear weapons capability. And the final determinant, I'd say, is the view that the US is seen as a genuine possible threat. Of course on top of all that, you have to add in what we were talking about in the first half of this meeting: that is, the multiple elements and multiple factions that shape foreign policy in Iran. Yes, foreign policy and security policy is largely determined by the Iranian NSC (National Security Council) but of course in that, these various factions are also (some of them anyway) represented and there is a gradual change of composition taking place in the National Security Council.

All right, to what extent, then, are ideas involved? It is also in these factions, I suppose, that you can see some of the ideational legacies of the Revolution pulling through, but I would argue the largest ideational factor is nationalism. The worry that lots of people have had about Iran, especially in the U.S. but not just in the U.S., is that particularly since Ahmadinejad's election, there has been this irrational element, (i.e. "Who is this guy?"). I remember a colleague, a very good scholar otherwise, simply saying the guy's a "nutcase." If you get that sort of language, of course it's not surprising people get worried. Does Iranian foreign policy have an irrational and hence dangerous tinge to it, especially when you think about the nuclear file? My answer would be "no", for a number of reasons.

The first reason is that one of the bits of evidence often referred to on this is what Ahmadinejad said about Israel or about the Zionist entity or regime. There's a lot of discussion possible about this but as far as I can read it, all he was doing in fact was quoting something that Khomeini had said. Clearly he sympathized with it, but it does not translate, at least in my estimation, to a view that Israel can be physically destroyed. We can discuss that. Secondly, his rhetoric ties in directly, I think, to what we were discussing before the break: that is, domestic politics and factionalism. And in particular, I think, he tries to build up not only his own support in the country at large, but to kind of gather around some of his generation that went through the Iran-Iraq War, that was in the Baseej, and that was in the Revolutionary Guards. [In other words] that broadly conservative kind of group that felt excluded, as we were discussing before the break, that's now beginning to split. There are now these splits happening. One of their guys got to the Presidency and suddenly you see that there are now rivalries emerging, and I see a

lot of this rhetoric not as indicating some kind of irrational dangerous nutcase but quite simply a populist building of support and trying to rally the troops. The third reason simply comes from what I've said before, that is to say, there are perfectly rational security fears that influence Iran's foreign and security policies. And the fourth is that you could say that Khomeini, Khamenei and Ahmadinejad himself plus lots of others have actually said that the use of weapons of mass destruction in general is completely incompatible with Islamic values and with Iran's values. Now there's been debate about that – what exactly that means, whether it might mean that perhaps for defensive purposes if others have already done it might give you the right as well as a necessary evil. But it's instructive, I think, to at least note that when Iran was under terrible pressures in the Iran-Iraq war, when Iraqis were using chemical weapons, Khomeini vetoed the full-scale "hitting back" in the same way or flattening Baghdad.

What about the nuclear file more specifically? I think that there's been a change in the Iran nuclear debate. In fact the Wilson center itself had a meeting here a couple years ago, I think, and there's a very useful summary of the nuclear debate on that website. It shifted because it has become more public, particularly since the recent controversy with the EU and with the U.S. But the one thing that seems clear is that all the factions, not just different emerging factions within the conservative group, but across the spectrum (including reformists and most opponents of the regime) are united around two things: one, the right of nuclear power, and two, not to give in or to make policy under external pressure. That riles just about everyone both in society at large and amongst the various factions. Specifically on the nuclear weapons question, there's a range of views, I'd say. Nobody's one hundred percent sure; there's no opinion polls that are reliable on this, and nobody knows for one hundred percent what the various individuals think in power. But I'd say there's a big range of views amongst the relevant policy elites all the way from saying "No, no way should we have nuclear weapons, nor should we even think about it, both for ideological and for security reasons because its only going to hurt us more than anybody else" to on the other side [where] people who might be willing to consider it given Iran's security predicament. In-between [there are] a variety of views including "well, perhaps we should put ourselves in a position where others might think we'd be able to go for it if the time came and thus we can use that as a bargaining chip, as a deterrent, and of course as a means to achieve prestige in the region and more widely."

What about the facts, then? Well as I've already suggested, very few people are sure of the facts. I think the one thing we know for sure, the one "known-unknown", is that we don't know. But there's definitely no smoking gun, contrary to all the assertions that we have been hearing from certain parts of the U.S. administration. Iran is *not* demonstrably in substantial breach of the NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty). Of course it might be, but we can't be certain. The problem has been that there isn't any trust, and the intended way of countering this lack of trust was the confidence-building measures demanded by the EU3, and the IAEA and agreed to by Iran, some of which – the so-called "transparency measures" – Iran then later stated it didn't want to implement anymore. So if we know that there's no smoking gun and that beyond that there is a lack of trust and we're not absolutely sure what the various factions think, then what *are* the intentions?

I'm going to have to be very brief. I'll suggest just a few things. "Whose intentions?" is the first question. There are perhaps lots of different intentions among Iranian policymakers. We've already established that Ahmadinejad himself doesn't really have a major grip on foreign policy. So that's important, even though he has perhaps indirect influence. Secondly, the IRGC, the revolutionary guards, clearly have some hold and influence over the nuclear file. There have been recent statements by senior people from the revolutionary guards that they see themselves as having a role in foreign policy more generally, and of course they have a track record of actual involvement in regional activities that have occurred quite regardless of official government policy. But basically the upshot of it is, I think, that even if there are elements within the guards who think that under certain circumstances it might be defensible to go with the nuclear weapons option, I simply am not convinced that they either have the sufficient autonomy (room for maneuver) or that they'd be able to build up a sufficiently coherent coalition in favor of that particular strand of thought. That is, the strand of thought that says, "Yes, Iran should go for working and deployable nuclear weapons [and] to make that the dominant strand of policy preference in Iran." That is not to say that there would not be a possible consensus around a policy that aims at having the *potential* to move to nuclear weapons capability – even without intention to take the final step – as under such a policy those who are against their use in any circumstances, those who think it could be a useful bargaining chip and/or lend prestige, and those who think it might be permissible in extreme situations of defense, could come together.

What are the options in that case? This can be very brief. I think our options can be based on two observations: One, what are the drivers of Iranian policy that I just talked about and two, what does Iran want from the U.S.? Essentially I think Iran wants from the United States two things: recognition of its legitimate national security interests as it sees them and recognition of what it sees as its rightful place in the politics of the region. If those two things can be secured, then lots of things become possible. Consequently, I'd make the following point: isolation and threats and military intervention could only make things worse, firstly because it would influence the internal political shifts in the worst possible direction; secondly because it would probably enhance or speed up the pursuit of nuclear weapons; and thirdly because once you start getting into military action you then get backlash in the wider region. We can talk about the effectiveness of any military option in a more limited sense in discussion.

If that is not a desirable policy, then what are the alternatives? Well, a combination of carrots and face-saving avenues for climb-down, I think, can work, because prestige and image counts for a lot. And that means that whatever is happening in the current initiatives, the one thing that can destroy those regardless of the details in the proposals would be a perception that the U.S. is still out for regime change. If that is constantly being reiterated in all sorts of ways, then you can forget about the more specific negotiations constructively going anywhere very quickly.

To sum up, my guess is that Iran will not go fully nuclear in weapons terms, again contrary to what lots of people have been saying. It will want to get to a position, though,

where they can credibly keep the possibility open and [nurture] people's perceptions of the possibility that they might if they are pushed in a corner. The finding that Iran is about ten years away from nuclear weapons capabilities doesn't really mean anything. What country with advanced civilian nuclear technology is not in that position? It's all about intentions. So given the drivers that I have identified for Iran's security policy, threats, saber-rattling, and slights are precisely what may turn the situation into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Of course you could note that Iran's policy itself has been rather good at creating self-fulfilling prophecies, too, but that doesn't give Europeans or Americans an excuse to go down the same misguided route.