



# National Iranian American Council

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## TO TALK OR TO SANCTION – OBAMA’S IRAN DILEMMA

The Obama administration set out its presidency with an ambitious agenda for the Middle East. US troops were to be withdrawn from a stabilized Iraq, additional resources allocated to win the peace in Afghanistan, a renewed push for a viable peace in Israel and Palestine and, perhaps as a key to all of the above, diplomacy with Iran.

After masterfully – and unilaterally – changing the atmospherics between the two countries to make it more conducive to the success of diplomacy, while pushing back pressure from Israel and Congress to impose artificial deadlines for any negotiations with Iran, hardliners in Iran

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pulled the rug from under the feet of President Barack Obama.

Widespread fraud and irregularities in the elections, and perhaps more importantly, brutal repression of Iranians protesting the fraud, have left the Obama administration with a terrible dilemma. While US national interests still necessitate talks with Iran, diplomacy with Iran in the aftermath of the election coup could not come at a worse time.

Not only do talks under these circumstances risk playing into the hands of the most undemocratic elements of the Iranian government, the political chaos may also have rendered the Iranians incapable from making any major decisions. While they certainly can show up and negotiate, the political infighting at home may leave them unable to compromise abroad.

The subsequent failure of the negotiations would then be used by Obama’s opponents at home to shift America’s policy away from diplomacy and talks and towards the Bush administration’s emphasis on confrontation and threats.



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And with that shift would inevitably follow the very same failures that Bush administration’s brought to America: chaos in Iraq, uncertainty in Afghanistan, paralysis in Israel and Palestine and US gravitation towards war with Iran.

On the other hand, if negotiations do not take place, pressure on Obama to impose additional indiscriminate economic sanctions on Iran will increase – both Congressional sanctions and UN Security Council sanctions.

Like previous sanctions, the new gasoline sanctions being considered by Congress will likely inflict a heavy cost on the Iranian economy and add to the hardships of the average Iranian while leaving the government relatively unharmed. And, like previous sanctions, they will fail to change Iranian behavior or curb Tehran’s nuclear program.

They will succeed, however, in undoing the new atmospherics Obama has created and will undermine pros-

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pects for diplomacy down the road. As I show in *Treacherous Alliance – The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the US* (Yale University Press), the primary effect of US sanctions on Iran have not been the economic impact on the Iranian economy, but the political impact on any prospects for improved US-Iran relations.

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This is part of the reason proponents of sanctions have pressed so hard for them – if US-Iran diplomacy

is deemed detrimental to one’s interest, sanctions is the perfect pre-emptive remedy. The US simply cannot walk down the diplomacy path and the sanctions path at the same time.

This is why pursuing new sanctions can be a death knell for Obama’s overall Middle East policy, since it closes down the diplomacy option. Between a sanctions path that eliminates diplomacy, and a diplomacy path that may strengthen Ahmadinejad in the short term, there are no easy options for the President.

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