



Beyond the Headlines
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Iran: What Options are Left for the US

Patricia Ellis: Good evening everyone and thank you all so much for coming, particularly given the weather—but important topics and the show must go on. I'm just glad everyone is here because there's so much going on regarding Iran and we have the best person to guide us through these issues. Tonight, as I said, we are focusing on Iran. Our speaker is Barbara Slavin. She is currently a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center. I will tell you a little bit more about her bio and all the things she's done in the past. But this is one of our favorite series, Beyond the Headlines. I think it relates to my own personal experience as a journalist and what I love is these are the news-y topics and we want to deal with them as quickly as possible. But there are some issues—particularly when you're dealing with Iran, when you're dealing with the Middle East—that are always timely, so you don't have to worry about a news peg. Recently we've had programs on Egypt, on Libya, on Burma, on Pakistan, and our next one in this series is going to be about Russia. It will be on US–Russian relations with Celeste Wallander, and that will be on April 4th. And then we have a number of other types of events coming up. In our Embassy Series, we're going to have an event at the Embassy of Finland with the Ambassador, who happens to be a woman. She's going to be talking about the EU. We're also very excited about an upcoming event with Michelle Bachelet, our Celebrating Women Leaders Luncheon. We will have another event with Dina Powell, who is head of the Goldman Sachs Foundation and heads the *10,000 Women* program, which will also be exciting. So you can see that we cover so many different issues in so many different ways and that's what makes it interesting. One day it's Iran and the next day it's Finland. We have some members here with us, but for those who are not members, I hope you will consider joining us. Please check your participants list, because we always have a very interesting mix of people—diplomats, people from the non-profit world, the corporate world. We have Rosa here with us. She's the wife of the Indonesian Ambassador and she heads a women's group for women from Southeast Asia. We're please she could join us, and we're lucky to have Barbara back with us.

The topic for tonight—what are the options left for the US? Barbara spoke to us before when she wrote a book on Iran. It was 2007—hard to believe. Her book was called *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the US, and the Twisted Path to Confrontation*. She also spoke to us in 2009 after the Iranian elections. I don't know how much has changed and how much has stayed the same since then. The thing is, as I said, Iran is always particularly interesting, but particularly in the last few weeks. Even today, so much has been happening. There's all this tension between Iran and the US and the EU—the stepped-up sanctions, the visit from the IAEA inspectors, there's an upcoming parliamentary election this Friday, and then there are all the tensions with Israel. Prime Minister Netanyahu will be visiting on Monday and there's a lot of tension over the possibility of a strike against Iran. So there's a lot to discuss. And just a little bit in terms of Barbara. She is a career journalist and she was the managing editor for World and National Security at *The Washington Times*, she's senior diplomatic reporter at *USA Today*, she worked for *The Economist* in Cairo, *The New York Times Week in Review*, and I'll stop there. But we're very lucky to have you, and very happy to have you back and thank you so much for joining us. After Barbara speaks, we will have plenty of time for Q&A. I'm sure you'll have lots of good questions and lots of good dialogue, so please join me in welcoming Barbara.

Barbara Slavin: Thank you so much. As you said, the last time I was here was right after the 2009 elections and we had a rather spirited discussion about what that meant for Iran. I'm going to talk to you tonight about the "C-word," and this is not a disease. This is the word that is necessary. It describes the policy that is needed towards Iran, and that word is "containment." Now, this has become sort of a dirty word for some in Washington. There's even a resolution in the Senate that's been signed on to by more than a third of the Senators that would actually forbid containment as a way to keep Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. Needless to say, this is unconstitutional since it would deprive the President of a tool that might be required to deal with Iran. But it's not just unconstitutional, it's frankly wrong and it's even dangerous. It suggests that if Iran were to somehow achieve a nuclear weapons capability, the only option for the US would be to go to war with Iran, and that simply isn't so. There are choices. There are things we can do that are between "bombing Iran" and "an Iran with bombs," as the choice is often expressed. In fact, for the past 33 years, the US has been containing Iran. It's been trying to minimize its potential to do mischief in the region, as well as protect US interests and those of US allies. One can argue about how successful this policy has been. The Islamic republic is still there, and I personally believe that under the George W. Bush administration we lost several good opportunities—particularly after 9/11—to change the nature of the relationship when Mohammad Khatami was still the president of Iran, before we got the current occupant of that office, Ahmadinejad. Clearly Iran has continued to make progress toward a capability to make nuclear weapons.

At the same time, of course, we've seen under President Obama a somewhat different policy. He made a bigger effort to engage Iran without preconditions than his predecessor did, but he has also been responsible for bringing the toughest sanctions that have ever been imposed against Iran—some of the toughest sanctions that have ever been imposed against any country. It's my view that containment has in a sense already worked when you consider Iran's current situation. It has never been more isolated internationally. As I mentioned, it faces these incredible sanctions. It's also more isolated in the region. The Iranian narrative since the 1979 revolution has been that Iran represents the oppressed and represents resistance to tyranny, resistance to imperialism, but this narrative has been destroyed by Iran's own actions—most prominently, the way the regime behaved in 2009 after the presidential elections occurred, when there were allegations of fraud. Three million people came out on the streets of Iran and this opposition movement—the Green Movement—was ruthlessly crushed. Most recently, we have seen that Iran has come out in support of the Assad regime in Syria, which has now killed more than 7,000 of its own people. So any claim by Iran that it represents the oppressed or resistance to tyranny is exposed as, frankly, the lie that should have been exposed, or at least it should have been exposed now.

The other factor is that the sectarian divisions in the region are increasing. More and more Sunni Muslim governments are now ranged against Iran, which is of course a Shiite nation, the largest Shiite Muslim nation. Even in Iraq—where the United States gave Iran enormous influence by getting rid of Saddam Hussein, who had a minority Sunni regime—the relationship is not that good and Iraq of course is far from a success story. There's terrible violence, there's al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Maliki government is not that popular, and Iranians are not that popular in Iraq. They remember the eight-year war that was fought from 1980–1988 between Iran and Iraq and that nationality trumps religious affinity in this case very much so.

When you look at Iran's links with resistance groups, particularly those that oppose Israel, it's just lost Hamas. Hamas, Palestinian Sunni group, has left its headquarters in Damascus. One of their chieftains gave a speech recently in Cairo at al-Azhar, the center of Sunni learning, where he condemned Syria and basically distanced himself from Iran. So Iran has lost its ability to affect Hamas. It still has Hezbollah, which is a Lebanese Shiite Group, but even there one begins to detect a certain hedging. Hassan Nasrallah, who heads Hezbollah, has said recently that even if Israel were to attack Iran, one couldn't assume necessarily that Hezbollah would attack Israel. So I think—particularly if the Assad regime falls, but as long as this terrible fighting goes on in Syria—Iran will be increasingly isolated. And we all know that when your enemy is digging himself into a hole, you let him keep digging. You certainly

don't take away his shovel. Attacking Iran, abandoning containment, would be taking away the shovel. It would change the dynamic of the region enormously and I think the ramifications would be awful for the United States. We'd have to worry about our forces based in Afghanistan. In all likelihood Iran would give the Taliban a refuge in Iran, so the Taliban would have sanctuary on both sides of Afghanistan, which would really make a US exit very difficult and very bloody. In Iraq, we still have thousands of Americans and they will all be targets. Iran could retaliate in a number of ways that would bring pain. Certainly the price of oil would skyrocket and that would hurt everyone's economy. Iran would most likely retaliate in some form or fashion against Israel. Just today, there was a new poll that was released—quite fascinating—that shows that only 19% of Israelis would be in favor of attacking Iran's nuclear facilities without US approval, and only 42% would be in favor of attacking it with US approval. So even in Israel there's not a majority that's in favor of striking Iran.

It's clear that containment is a good option when you look at what a military option would bring to the world. And I haven't even mentioned what it would do in Iran, which is that it would put off the chances for reform for another generation, it would strengthen an unpopular government, it would give it hundreds if not thousands of new martyrs, and there would be collateral damage. Iran has a number of nuclear sites. The program is scattered all over. This is not like when Israel had one single site in Iraq in 1981 or in Syria in 2007. This is a mature nuclear program with many facilities. And to set back the program at all, you'd have to hit at least four sites. You'd have to hit the uranium conversion plant outside Isbahan, the uranium enrichment plant at Natanz, a facility near Qom that's buried in a mountain, called Fordow, and a heavy water plant and reactor that's under construction at Arak. So for sure you would kill thousands of people working at these sites, and there would be contaminants—radioactive and other materials—that would spread and would kill or injure thousands more Iranians. So, in a situation like that, a country that has been one of the more pro-American in the region—I'm talking in terms of the sentiment of the people—would certainly not remain so. And the Sunni-Shiite split that I mentioned would magically disappear and, in all of these countries that have been so hostile to Iran, where Iran has lost its following in the Arab street, the condemnation of the United States would be huge. We've just had this situation in Afghanistan where the inadvertent burning of a couple Qurans has led to massive riots, death of Americans at the hands of their Afghan counterparts. You can only imagine, if the US were to stage a pre-emptive strike on another Muslim country, where the US posture in the region would go.

So, these people in this town who talk blithely about striking Iran, starting another war, hitting a few sites, really are being worse than irresponsible. At least I'm happy, because I see a lot of pushback now, particularly from members of our military, who are saying this is not a simple strike. This would require a lot of boots on the ground, require invasion of a country with 75 million people—a country three times the size of Iraq. I hope this message will get out there. I'm very concerned that when we see the Republicans talk about this, the presidential candidates, by and large they are being very irresponsible about this as well. Statements like the one from Mitt Romney that “if I become President Iran will not get nuclear weapons, but if Barack Obama stays President, it will” are really not helpful. And if there's anything consoling about it, it's that Ron Paul—I think one of the reasons his message has resonated, particularly with younger people, is because he's anti-war. So that's why I like containment. I think it will work very well.

I think the United States can continue the new sanctions, which are having quite an effect—quite frankly, they are having almost too much of an effect. It's hurting a lot of ordinary people, not just the regime. But certainly, Iran is having difficulty selling oil, getting hard currency. There was a story just the other day that Iran is now saying it can be paid in gold for the oil because no bank will handle the transaction. The latest legislation that Congress just passed, and that President Obama signed into law, prevents any bank from dealing with Iran's Central Bank. If they do, they cannot deal with US banks, which means they're ex-communicated from the global financial system. And as a result, Iran is really resorting to barter arrangements with countries like China, India, and Turkey. It's not able to exchange hard currency. Instead, it has to be paid in local currency. With China, basically the Chinese provide goods and services and Iran provides oil. Money isn't even changing hands at this point, which is

difficult. The Iranian currency, the Rial, has dropped by half its value in just three months, so clearly they're feeling an impact. This is the impact of containment.

The other aspect, though, that we need and haven't seen enough of yet—though I hear that there might be another round of talks by the end of March, which is great—is we need to put some proposals on the table that the Iranians might actually be able to accept and that would cap the uranium enrichment program in such a way that we can calm down the Israelis. So we need a two-prong policy—we need to contain Iran, and we need to calm down the Israelis so that they don't do anything stupid that would put all of us in jeopardy. Then we need to be patient, because the Iranian people will change that regime if given time, and if not given an excuse to rally around their government. We have elections coming up on Friday. I would predict that the turnout will be very low because it's an extremely limited choice among party loyalists. Even some supporters of Ahmadinejad are not being allowed to run, so this is not even a choice between Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum, this is a choice between Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dee. And Iranians are not fooled. After what happened in 2009, they will not be fooled. So we need to wait, apply pressure, appear reasonable. The more reasonable we appear, the less reasonable the leadership of Iran, led by their Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, appears. And this regime will disappear, like so many authoritarian regimes before it. I think that's our option, and I don't think it's a bad one. I will stop there and take your questions.

Ms. Ellis: Thank you very much. I'm going to open it up with the news of the day, which is on North Korea. An agreement was reached with North Korea, and in exchange for a big food package, the North Koreans have agreed to a moratorium on their nuclear testing and they also have agreed to allow the IAEA inspectors in. This was in the works for quite some time, and I'm just wondering if there are lessons from this. Is this a precedent? What do you think the Iranians are thinking? How much are they watching?

Ms. Slavin: I was telling Pat before this that the only reason I didn't write a book about North Korea is the North Koreans stopped giving me visas, but the Iranians kept giving me visas. So, I didn't feel qualified to write a book about North Korea. But I've been there three times, and I used to follow the negotiations with North Korea very closely. And I think this is really good news. It has an impact in that I think the Iranians will see "well, North Korea has reached an agreement and they're going to get something for it," so perhaps the message is that the same can be true for them. Of course North Korea doesn't have as many options—it doesn't have oil, for starters, and they truly are desperate for food aid. Of course, they've had regime change in a way because their leader has died and his son has taken over. So it's an opportunity to turn a page. The last time the US and North Korea reached an agreement was when their founding leader, Kim Il Sung, had died. So it's interesting that this follows pretty much as the 1994 framework did. As for the North Koreans, we'll see. Will they cheat? Will they follow through on the letter of this? But you know, as I say, it is a good sign and now what we need is a reasonable offer that can be made to the Iranians that, if they don't accept it, can be publicized so that the Iranian people will know what their leaders gave up, and that the fault for the misery they're enduring is because of their leadership.

Ms. Ellis: Now, is there another link? These talks took place in Beijing. China is Iran's largest trading partner, and the largest importer of Iranian oil, along with the Indians, the South Koreans, let's see—

Ms. Slavin: Turks. The Turks buy natural gas.

Ms. Ellis: Yes, and Japan as well. So I'm just wondering if that's another message, because the US has been asking countries—as the Europeans have—that buy a lot of Iranian oil to cut back. The Chinese and the Japanese are trying to cut back, but they have problems doing it following the whole nuclear disaster. The Chinese actually last year increased their imports of oil substantially, and the Indians have not responded. So I'm just wondering how key this is as we're increasing the sanctions and turning the screws.

Ms. Slavin: Well, I did a report on that late last year for the Atlantic Council. If you go to the ACUS [Atlantic Council of the US] website, you can find it. The Chinese are cutting back. Actually, the Indians are now importing more oil in the last couple of months of 2012 than the Chinese, but I think the Chinese are waiting to get a discounted price. When the Iranians get desperate, the Chinese will come in and scoop it up. The Chinese still have enormous influence. They are still Iran's biggest trading partner. As European countries have left, China has moved in. If they were to take a strong stand, they could have a strong influence. And of course they're part of the so-called P5+1, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany, which negotiates with Iran and which is likely to have another meeting with the Iranians at the end of March or beginning of April. They would really have to threaten Iran with some dire consequences, but if they do, perhaps that could change the mentality of the leadership in Tehran.

Ms. Ellis: And just my last question, and then we'll open it up for everyone, goes back to something you addressed and that's Syria. So, we have the combination of Hamas withdrawing its support for the Syrian government and that affects Iran too because they're very close, and Iran is one of the few countries, along with Russia, still supporting the Syrians. And how much is it—if you could talk a little bit more about how it's damaging also its goal to be the leader in the region, amongst other things?

Ms. Slavin: Well I think it's really ripped the veil off, to use a Muslim metaphor, Iran's claims to represent the oppressed. They're going through all sorts of gymnastics trying to support the Arab uprisings, except in the case of Syria, and it simply doesn't work for them anymore. They're also beginning to show a little bit of hedging behavior. They've tried to have meetings with some members of the Syrian opposition. There is some hope, particularly if the members of the UN Security Council begin to act—and there's some indication there's going to be another effort at a UN Security Resolution just on the subject of humanitarian situation in Syria. And of course Putin will have been re-elected by next Sunday and he may be less allergic to doing something that would be seen as agreeing with the international community and agreeing with the US, and allow at least a modest UN Council resolution to go through to permit some humanitarian assistance. Unfortunately, the city of Homs may not exist anymore by the time the UN gets around to acting.

Ms. Ellis: I guess one last question about the neighborhood, and that's about the relations between Turkey and Iran at this time, because you said Turkey purchases oil, but Turkey is distancing itself from the Syrian government. And also, Turkey wants to be a leader. What's going on?

Ms. Slavin: Turkey actually buys natural gas from Iran. Iran is the second largest supplier of natural gas. Well, you know, Turkey's had a policy of no problems with the neighbors and that's all been shot to hell with Syria, and their relationship with Iran is much more strained than it was. There are still important economic ties, but clearly they're on opposite sides now when it comes to Syria. Turkey has also accepted NATO radar on their territory, which is directed against Iranian missiles and this has infuriated Iranians as well. The Turks tried to mediate the nuclear dispute in 2010 and it didn't work. They still may be the venue for the next round of talks with Iran, but the relationship is not what it was a few years ago. Still, I think the Turks can play a role. Frankly, if you look at developments in the region, the big winners in many ways have been the Turks and the Saudis—the Turks because they are trying to ride the wave of the Arab uprisings and the Arab awakening, and the Saudis because they have the oil money to do a lot. And Iran is a loser. It's a big loser.

Ms. Ellis: Okay, let's open it up. Who has questions? I'm sure there are lots of questions. Yes?

Question: Michelle Sands, with Women's Foreign Policy Group. I just have a couple questions which are not completely related. You talked about a deal that Iran would accept. What, in your opinion, is a deal that Iran would accept? And the second question is—I know at your last talk in 2009 at WFPG, you mentioned like you did a bit today, that the Iranian regime seemed ready to crumble—how do you think, especially given US elections later this year and Iranian elections in March next year, that will affect timing? Will they try to hold off on a deal in case things change starting in November?

Ms. Ellis: There are also transitions in France, in China...

Ms. Slavin: A lot of transitions. In terms of a deal they could accept, of course no one knows what they would or would not accept, but I can think of a deal that would be reasonable and that would also go a long way towards calming Israel, which is of course one of the goals of US foreign policy right now, and that would be to cap uranium enrichment at 5% U-235. This is the isotope that, if you get 90% concentration of it, is what you need to build a nuclear weapon. You need 5% or under for civilian reactors. Currently Iran is enriching some to 20%, which is dangerously close to weapons-grade, so if you could cap it at 20%, and also if you could get the Iranians to stop enriching at this site that is buried in a mountain, that would be good. But you have to offer them something in return. You would have to offer them some type of sanctions relief and I'm not sure that the Obama Administration is prepared to do that in an election year for us and risk being called an appeaser and all these other epithets that have been thrown at them—even though, as I mentioned, the Obama Administration has been more successful than any previous US government in putting pressure on the Iranian regime. So we'll see. We'll see what they come up with.

The Russians have proposed something called a “step-by-step” plan, where the Iranians would do X, and then there would be a bit of sanctions relief, and then the Iranians would do Y, and receive a little more sanctions relief. So perhaps something like that might be the model. In terms of the internal situation, perhaps I was a little too optimistic two years ago that the Iranian government would fall. Clearly that has not happened, but I do believe that this is a very combustible situation and that none of us know what the spark might be that would cause millions of people to come out on the streets again. There could be some event that we don't even anticipate now. I think it has to come from the inside. I don't think it can come from the outside. I think Iranians themselves, at some point, have to have the courage to get rid of this government. We might have to wait for the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei to die. I've had some Iranians tell me that when Ayatollah Khamenei dies, all the women in Iran will run out in the streets and rip off their headscarves and dance and be so grateful. Increasingly the young people of the country try to ignore the leadership. They try to live their lives the best that they can.

If any of you have not seen this amazing movie, *A Separation*, run. Run and see it before it leaves Washington. It's only in the art houses, but it is so good, and it gives you such a sense of the humanity of the people and of the terrible stresses that they have to contend with living in that country, and the terrible decisions they have to make. The heroine of it wants to leave because she has a daughter and she doesn't want her daughter to have to go through adolescence in Iran. But her husband has a father who has Alzheimer's and he can't leave. It's just a heart-wrenching situation. These are fabulous people. I've been very privileged over the years to meet some truly wonderful people, and I do believe that there will be a change. You mentioned the presidential elections that are next year. My sense is that, assuming they go forward, you will see someone who has a somewhat less objectionable face than Ahmadinejad. There will be somebody who seems a bit more pragmatic, a bit more diplomatic, and who at least can present a better front for the Islamic Republic than Ahmadinejad has done.

Question: Azadeh Meshkaty, and I work with a political consulting company. While we're on the topic of regime change, there's a tendency for revolutions to occur on the economic uptick. Is there a potential that the degree of the sanctions currently, if they prolong for much longer, could actually be to the detriment of mobilization or to the detriment of a potential catalyst effect amongst the people?

Ms. Slavin: I worry about that. I worry that the government, in its great zeal to show that it's doing something about Iran, has gone too far. Most people are just worrying about how to get through the day. Upper middle-class people are leaving or sending their kids overseas, just trying to escape. And that is not a situation in which it is going to be easy to change the regime. That is why I hope we get into a negotiating path where there actually might be some sanctions relief. If you look at the pattern of change in these kinds of regimes—if you look at the old Soviet Union, if you look at China—it's only

when the United States embarks on a policy of détente, when we have a US embassy, and when tensions go down that these regimes tend to crumble. So we should keep that in mind as we put layer after layer of new sanctions on Iran.

Question: Mary Ann Stein, with Fund for Global Human Rights. I have a couple of questions. Recently I heard President Clinton, who was asked a question about Iran, go quite emphatically into “we can’t possibly let Iran get nuclear weapons,” and I’ve heard other diplomats say the same thing and talk about what they think the consequences would be in the region, not to mention their concern about nuclear material—Clinton said the size of a cookie—going to a suitcase bomb that I think he said could destroy 20% of Washington, DC. But at the same time, I also have been reading some things about what it would take militarily to take out the nuclear creative infrastructure and it sounds to me as if it’s pretty impossible to actually do that. And I’d be interested in your views about that. And finally, in terms of your ideas about a popular uprising, I’m wondering about the events in the Near East in the various countries where, progressively, there have been uprisings. The consequences, the brutality, etc., has been rather unprecedented it seems to me. And Iran has previously, as you said, very ferociously put down the protests. And it would seem to me that the Iranians would know that and that would make it quite difficult to carry out regime change.

Ms. Slavin: That’s a lot of questions. In terms of what President Clinton said, look, I mean it’s always unacceptable until it’s not. We said it was unacceptable with North Korea and North Korea has had two nuclear tests. And we just signed an agreement with them today, another one. Part of me thinks that maybe Iran actually should go and get the bomb, because then the US would be forced to sit down and talk, because that’s what we do when countries get the bomb. We did it with China. We did it with the Soviet Union. We did it with North Korea. I do not share the fear of an Iran with a nuclear weapons capability to the same extent that some do. What would they do with a nuclear weapon? How could they possibly use it? Whether it was delivered by a suitcase, or on top of a missile, people would know where it came from. And the retaliation would be swift and it would destroy Iran as a political entity. It would destroy Iran as a nation. I just read a report from CSIS by Tony Cordesman noting that, in his view—and I think he’s well informed—Israel has already targeted Iran’s major population centers with thermo-nuclear weapons. If Iran were to dare take such action, it would be destroyed. There’s simply no purpose in it. Why does Iran want nuclear weapons capability? It wants to be able to show its own people that they have something gained from 33 years of Islamic Republic misery. Iran has become an advanced nation. Iran wants to deter an attack on itself. It wants a place at the table in terms of the region and security negotiations. I just simply cannot believe—

Ms. Ellis: Might they try to sell it?

Ms. Slavin: No! It just doesn’t compute for me. I know Israelis want to be 100% certain that Iran would not attack. But you simply don’t get that certainty in life. And the problem is that if you do a cost-benefit analysis and if you look at the downside of starting something with the Iranians, frankly this is far worse than taking the miniscule chance that Iran would strike Israel with a nuke. Also, why do I say this? It’s because Iran needs Israel. It needs the “Little Satan,” as it calls it. Otherwise it has no heart to its foreign policy, which is all based on getting rid of this entity. It simply wouldn’t happen. There are also many Muslims in Israel who would be killed. It simply doesn’t compute for me. People say this—politicians say this—but in their heart of hearts, I simply don’t think they mean it. In terms of the impact of what’s going on in the region, there is an impact certainly. The young people who started it in Egypt, in Tahrir—a lot of them were actually in contact with the Green movement people in terms of how you use Facebook, Twitter, and various social media to bring people together. Iranians have a rather high view of themselves compared to Arabs, so in general if you ask this question, they don’t see that this relates to them. I think the only thing that might be a successful revolution in Syria, because Syria has been such a close ally of the Iranian government. So I think that might give heart perhaps to Iranians to go out in the streets again. We’re going to need to see cracks in the military. There’s going to have to be some sense among Iranians that if they go out in the streets again, the members of the Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Basij—which is kind of a group of paramilitary thugs in the employ

of the government—won't be turning their guns on people. And once there's a sense that the repression is cracking in this way, then I think the whole thing comes crumbling down.

Question: Stanley Kober, I'm looking at an article here that's from Ahmadinejad's website. A couple of days ago, he met with the Lebanese defense minister, and he said "their days are numbered," referring to Israel. "The world order advocated by them is going to end and a new world order based on justice and humanitarian principles begins." Now the reason I bring this up is, if their objective is deterrence, why poke Israel like this at this time? Why the Holocaust denial? Why go poke, poke, poke?

Ms. Slavin: Well you obviously haven't read my book. I've got a whole chapter in there about Ahmadinejad.

Question: But it's not just Ahmadinejad.

Ms. Slavin: No, but he's the exemplar of it. He's the fourth of seven children. He didn't get enough love as a child. He always wants to get attention and he learned very early on that if you say things like this, it gets you attention from the outside world. He personally does not agree with a Jewish state in Israel. That's certainly his view. But this is bombast. Justice and humanitarian principles—that's what we're seeing in Syria right now? As I said, maybe it had a little bit of cache. If you look at the polling, Iran and Ahmadinejad both reached the height of their popularity in 2006, after the Israelis fought a war with Hezbollah in Lebanon. From that time, but particularly since 2009, it's gone straight down. And Ahmadinejad is no longer a hero in the Arab world. He's just not. People have their own struggles now. They have their own heroes and they don't need him. This is a desperate attempt to hang on to the anti-Israeli card and make himself relevant.

Question: So—quickly—how does that explain Egypt allowing the passage of those Iranian warships clearly delivering nuclear material to Syria?

Ms. Slavin: First of all, this latest report apparently simply isn't true, according to my information. There were no warships delivering material to Syria. It was apocryphal.

Question: The ships didn't go through the Suez Canal?

Ms. Slavin: Not according to my information. There was an incident about a year ago where two ships did, and that was just Egyptians putting their finger in our eye as they like to do.

Ms. Ellis: I have another question, which is very far from his region, but the Iranian president has very few allies, one of whom is Chavez—who is not in particularly good health, and let's say he leaves the scene. How is that going to influence things? Because he's made a number of trips to Venezuela.

Ms. Slavin: This Iran–Latin America relationship is very tenuous and it's mostly propaganda. There's very little trade. The connection with Venezuela is particularly odd, since they're both oil producers, so they don't really have any natural synergy. There are some factories that Iranians set up that produce sub-standard cars—things that Venezuelans don't need and don't want. I think if Chavez leaves the scene, this particular alliance will really be history. Even the propaganda alliance will be history.

Question: Kelly Recker, Women's Foreign Policy Group. I read somewhere recently that the Iranian people can hate both their government and hate us for the sanctions that are making their lives so incredibly difficult. As sanctions become increasingly more severe, how do we respond to that and get them on our side? And, on the Ahmadinejad note, how does he save face if he does end up reversing? If the sanctions are too much for them to handle, how can he handle that when he's already becoming so irrelevant?

Ms. Slavin: I'll answer the second one first because it's interesting. He's actually made some proposals to cap uranium enrichment at 20%, but we haven't taken him up on those because there was an agreement that was reached back in 2009, and then it was repudiated by all of his opponents. He's made so many enemies in Iran that no one would allow him the victory of reaching a deal with the United States. He's such an odd duck. I mean he spoils things and then he makes an effort when he's at his weakest to try to reach a deal, and of course it doesn't go anywhere. He's irrelevant. He won't be there next year. The deal has to be reached with the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. He's the one that calls all the shots on all of these decisions anyway, not Ahmadinejad. As for Iranians hating us, I think that's a big danger. We are really making them pay a price. There are certain sanctions that I favor. The sanctions that make it hard for Iran to get materials, for Iran to make more centrifuges or parts for its missile program, the sanctions that name and shame human rights abusers or the people who tortured and killed after 2009—I'm all in favor of those. And those are very popular with the Iranian people. But the ones that prevent Iranians from sending money to each other abroad, sending money to their kid who's in college in US universities, I think those are worse than stupid. And I just think it's because of the nature of our political system that we have people in Congress who don't think, who are trying to impress their constituents, and trying to impress a certain lobby which is about to have a conference in Washington on Sunday and Monday. So they do things that go too far and don't achieve the goal that they really want. That's why I say that I hope we get into a negotiating process, where sanctions may be lifted in such a way that the Iranian people will see that we're not out to punish them. What we are about is to change the behavior of their government and hopefully over time, the nature of their government.

Ms. Ellis: Did you want to jump in on this topic?

Question: Azadeh Meshkay, yes. You mentioned that it's ultimately going to come down to a negotiation with Khamenei. This is kind of his brain child, his objective to get nuclear weaponry for his country. What would it take in terms of negotiations to actually get him to sit at a table? What kind of compromise would the US have to make?

Ms. Slavin: It may not be possible. We may have to wait for Iran to cross that proverbial "red line." We may have to wait for him to die. I don't think he's irrational. He is the Supreme Leader. He does have a rather narrow decision-making circle right now. But if the members of the Revolutionary Guard Corps say that Iran simply cannot continue going on the way it's going on, he may do something so that Iran can continue to work towards a bomb but in a more clever fashion, trying to do so covertly. Iran suspended uranium enrichment from 2003 to 2005. During that time, it worked on other aspects of the program. Iran has waited a long time for nuclear weapons. This is a program that started under the Shah, when we gave it its first nuclear reactor back in 1950-something. Iran can wait a while longer, especially if he doesn't think the country is in danger of being attacked. So that's why all this loose talk about military options, about threatening... If you look at the agreement that was reached with the North Koreans, there's a statement there that the US has no "hostile intent" towards North Korea. I'm not sure Iranians would believe this, but that's something that could be said. The idea is just to stretch this out, slow this down, keep them from developing nuclear weapons long enough that something can change within the country.

Question: Nancy Bearg, George Washington University. I was going to ask a question about Khamenei and his feelings about the nuclear weapons, but I want to ask what is really driving him. What you say makes sense, that if they attack Israel, it's immediate retaliation. I think there are some things driving him, but I don't know enough about him to know if it drives him to have influence in the region, to be the biggest power in the region or to have that kind of hegemony over other nations and to keep themselves secure because they would have the weapons. Does he think that way? What is driving him?

Ms. Slavin: Well, I haven't had the pleasure of meeting him. He doesn't meet journalists in general, and he certainly doesn't meet foreign women journalists. [Laughter.] I have met all of Iran's presidents

who are still living, past and present, but I haven't met Ayatollah Khamenei. In some ways I think Iran is the same way it was under the Shah—it has a very inflated sense of its importance and it believes it has a right to a major role in the region. When it looks around, it sees that Israel has nuclear weapons, Pakistan has nuclear weapons, India has nuclear weapons, and Russia and China all have nuclear weapons. So it understands that, to be a “big boy” in the game, having nuclear weapons can definitely help you. On the other hand, Iran has also stayed in the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. It has not quit the way North Korea did. So if it were to develop nuclear weapons, it would have to leave the NPT and it would expose itself. It has argued to the Non-Aligned Movement, where it still has some cache, that it's being unfairly targeted and the sanctions are unfair, since Iran only wants nuclear power for peaceful purposes. So of course that fig leaf would be gone, and I think there are conflicting feelings about it. They want to go right up to the edge, but I'm not sure they actually want to go over because then they would lose this deniability, or this plausible deniability. And there would be ramifications. It would be harder for the Chinese and the Russians to protect them in the UN Security Council if they were to actually develop a nuclear weapon. Khamenei has agreed to this. The reason Iran resumed the nuclear program—it stopped after the revolution, the European countries which had been providing Iran with material, its nuclear program stopped after the Shah was overthrown, and then during height of Iran-Iraq War, Ayatollah Khamenei re-activated it because Iran was afraid that Iraq was going to use nuclear weapons against Iran. Iraq was already using chemical weapons against Iran with devastating consequences. So the original intent was to deter Iraq. It's very interesting that Iran suspended the program in 2003. Some people say it's because they were terrified that the US would attack Iran at that time since we had just gotten rid of Saddam Hussein. I think a bigger reason was that Saddam Hussein had been deposed, and Iran didn't have to worry about Iraq anymore and they found out that, lo and behold, Iraq didn't have nuclear weapons. So the rationale for the program disappeared for a while. My fear is that we're giving them a new rationale because we're threatening. One of these idiot pundits, Tucker Carlson, said we should annihilate Iran on *Fox News* the other day. Annihilate Iran. I'm sorry, but when people in Iran—particularly people who have not traveled, who don't understand the world—when they hear language like this, they think “we need to protect ourselves against these people.” They don't know that this guy is a buffoon.

Question: Hassan Massali, and I am participating as a representative of Action for Democracy and Human Rights in the Middle East. I am very active among the Iranian opposition. I have documents that show that Iran, for at least 10 years—as we say in Persian language, played “cat and mouse”—telling Europeans that they were going to make an atom bomb. But if they are making an atom bomb or not, why are these great powers—the United States and Europe— why are they are making themselves busy with such policy? If they are seriously making an atom bomb, what is their vision to stop that politically, militarily, and so on? I have some ideas. And second question—I have some documents that show that, since the establishment of this regime—this Islamic Republic—from 1980 until 1988 has killed or eliminated more than 20,000 young people from different groups, and still they are continuing to execute daily. Are the US and Europe—concentrating on the United States—interested to promote democracy and human rights or not? And the third question is, what is the vision of the US administration for regime change in Iran? Or do they still want to find another criminal faction inside this government and then establish another government?

Ms. Slavin: I think my notion is of containment—I think that really is the notion of the Obama Administration. They don't call it that, but it is. Containment means trying to put a fence around Iran's ability to create mischief until this regime goes. But do I think the US is going to go in and overthrow this regime for Iranians? No, and I don't think frankly that we can and I don't think that our track record is very good. We tried this in 1953 with Mosaddegh and we got the Shah back. And then we got the 1979 Iranian revolution. We got rid of Saddam Hussein and now we have whatever you want to call Iraq—I certainly wouldn't call it a democracy. The objective, as I say, is to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, and then to contain Iran if it does. I don't really see what more the United States can do. I mentioned human rights sanctions—naming and shaming. Certainly we should do everything we can to help Iranians communicate with each other, help them with the Internet, make it more difficult for the government to filter the Internet or to block Iranians from organizing among themselves, give them

whatever tools for popular mobilization that can be provided safely to them, because we don't want another Hungarian revolution where we egg people on and then they're all massacred in the streets. As for the figures you mentioned, the figures I've seen is that around 10,000 people were killed during the Revolution and in the immediate aftermath. Then of course we had so many people die during the Iran-Iraq war. There were young prisoners who were put to death in 1988 at the end of the Iran-Iraq war. Clearly, there's a lot of blood on the hands of this government—there's no doubt. They didn't do it as quickly as the Syrian government has, but clearly over time there's a tremendous amount of blood on their hands. I wish these people nothing but the best, but I don't think we can choose the leadership for them. They have to have the courage to do that themselves.

Question: Susan Pearce, with CSIS. What do you think the Russian interests and positions are in this situation?

Ms. Slavin: Russia's been really interesting. In Russia, the reset has worked in the sense that they have been fairly cooperative on Iran. They benefit from the tension, of course. Every time the price of oil goes up, that's money in Russia's pocket. They're clearly not concerned that an Iran with nuclear weapons would menace them. You can be fairly cynical about it. At the same time, they've not given Iran the wherewithal to try to blunt an attack. There's an air defense system, the S-300, that Russians agreed to sell Iran. Then after UN Security resolutions passed in 2010 that barred arms sales to Iran, the Russians stopped that sale, so they really have not been that bad. The real problem with Iran has been China, because China's the one that has really benefited in economic terms and has not been willing to jeopardize its trade ties with Iran.

Ms. Ellis: Okay, time for one or two more questions. Yes? She's visiting from France. Speak as loudly as you can so they can hear you.

Question: Sahim Habchi, yes I am from France, I was born in Algeria and grew up in France. I am a former president of a women's organization that deals a lot with the poor neighborhoods across France but also supports women across Arab countries. My question is very simple. I was in Dubai a month ago and it's very interesting to see the perspective on the Strait of Hormuz there. People there don't really think that Iran is going to attack Hezbollah or Israel, and it's very important to understand why, at this very particular moment in history, where people in those countries that we have seen for such a long time as submissive to dictatorship, have created this "wave." Of course, we don't really know where it's going, but we hear the people. I don't really understand why Europe, France, and also the United States, choose to support what they call moderate Islamists, who don't really exist, if you know what's going on right now in Tunisia. A man from Egypt, who is very famous there, recently arrived in Tunisia and talked about genital mutilation. For women, Tunisia was the first model of women's rights in all the area, so it's very strange to see the influence from all these regions, from Morocco, to Egypt, to Tunisia, to Libya, that is being established right now. Of course, Iran is playing another game with Hezbollah as well. Of course we cannot influence the leadership of the people. They don't want that. They just want the foreign policy of our country, of the US, of Europe, to be clear in what we call our claim of human rights. And we cannot support this type of new regime that is totally going to destroy the little progress acquired. And of course there is the question of how Turkey is playing Iran. Qatar is very involved in the region right now, in what they call in Dubai the "armed arm" of the US. Unfortunately, France decided to follow this type of foreign policy and has dealt with a lot of it.

Ms. Slavin: Yes, I think I understand. Yes, I think it's very important that we continue to stand for human rights and for women's rights. But we cannot tell these countries what kind of governments to choose. And my hope is that—particularly these types of Islamist leaders who have been exiled over the years, people who've been outside their country, people like Rashid al-Ghannushi in Tunisia and so on—have some understanding that, if they try to suppress the rights of women once they come in to power, that they're going to pay a price in terms of their relationship with the West and in terms of the popularity of the regime. So I don't think that the women who went in to Tahrir are going to be happy if they see that the limited rights that they have in a country like Egypt are being taken away from them.

This is a process of generations. If you look at Iran, the women there are fierce. They're amazing, and that's because they've had to put up with 33 years of Islamic crap, and they don't like it. So they have taken advantage of the opportunities that are available—going to university, becoming highly educated, and making themselves ready for opportunities when and if they come. I wouldn't be so pessimistic. Groups like yours have to be very vigilant. All the human rights organizations, journalists who write about these issues, have to be very vigilant. But I don't think women, particularly educated women who have just come out from under tyrannical regimes, are going to let their rights be taken away without a fight.

Ms. Ellis: Okay, well I think we have come to the end of a very interesting evening. I want to thank Barbara so much. We all learned a lot and I'm sure we will be discussing this again sometime soon.

Ms. Slavin: Can I make one plug? There is a new website, called Al-Monitor, and I think tomorrow I'll have a piece up about calming Israel and containing Iran, so if you want to read more on the topic of my talk, go to Al-monitor.com. It's a new website that's devoted to news from the Middle East, and there's a lot of interesting commentary on the site I think you might enjoy.

Ms. Ellis: Well, thank you all for coming and for your good questions. Thanks a lot.