

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

**IRAN'S CLENCHED FIST:
SHOULD THE UNITED STATES
STILL EXTEND ITS HAND?**

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KARIM SADJADPOUR: We're ready to begin. First, thank you all so much for coming. It's a pleasure to have you. And it's a pleasure to host really what is in my opinion a world-class panel today in the sense of we have Roger Cohen, one of the world's most widely read columnists; Ali Ansari, one of the world's leading experts on Iran; and my colleague, George Perkovich who's one of the world's leading experts on nonproliferation issues. And all three of them I count as good friends. I think you have their biographies so I will spare you traditional Persian introductions.

But I will say there's an expression in Persian that when you want to compliment someone, you put watermelons under their arms to kind of puff them up. And all three of them are very watermelon-worthy. (Laughter.)

So what I'll do is I'll – we'll start off here with a bit of Q&A and then we'll have ample time for questions. And I wanted to begin with my friend Ali and simply ask him: Where is this going? What is the mindset would you say of the leadership, Khamenei and Ahmadinejad? And trying to get inside the head of Moussavi and others – what strategy would you advise them to take if you were to advise them? What is it that they are thinking these days?

ALI ANSARI: Start with the easy question, Karim. Well, in terms of where we think things are going, I mean, as with Iran, in the best of times it's always extremely difficult to predict, of course. But one of the things that I think it's quite striking about the current situation is I don't think many Iranians know where they're going either. And I don't think many of the leadership on either side of the divide have much of an idea what will happen in the medium to long term.

I think one could say, if you go in past experience, that perhaps the principalists are trying to play a good tactical game and those on the other side of the divide – it's curious to call them opposition, but if we can count Mr. Rafsanjani as now part of the opposition in the Islamic Republic, which is a curious situation to be in, but they would certainly be taking perhaps more of a strategic perspective on what is going on.

But what I'm very interested in, partly because of my biases and my own discipline, is the historical worldviews of these individual characters and what lessons from their particular history or particular narrative they're taking. And it's quite clear and I think you've mentioned this before, Karim, but I think Mr. Khamenei takes a lot of lessons from the experience of '78 and his reading of it, his interpretation of it.

I think others are looking further back as a matter of fact. I think for me, certainly, one of the interesting aspects of this, particularly when you look at the way in which the Iranians are interpreting events in terms of the constitutional revolution and that is to define the system, so what they're doing is basically arguing for how you define the Islamic Republic within its – do you constrain the role of the autocrat and how do you do that?

But it's also seen in the way in which the Iranians, of course, are playing it within the framework of a traditional great game. And you can see that in a sense that I don't think is understood as much in the Anglo-Saxon world – that's to blame both of the British and the Americans for this – that perhaps it's not appreciated as much that the Iranians will tend to see this as part of – an aspect of a great game where the Russians are very intricately involved.

And I don't think that death to Russia was simply an indication of the fact that the Russians recognized Ahmadinejad's government. There could be many governments recognized – well, several of them anyway recognize Ahmadinejad's government, including the Turks, so I don't think – I think it goes much deeper than that. I think there's this feeling that the current principalist government or the regime, the principalist regime has got too far too close to the Russians and the Russians, historically speaking, have been very much in favor of autocracy, certainly in Iran.

MR. SADJADPOUR: But to kind of press you on – I don't want to ask you to make predictions but in terms of how this is going to play out in the next weeks and months – former President Khatami has called for a referendum. Rafsanjani, as you saw, challenged the legitimacy of these elections in a very important form, the Friday press sermon. What is the future for Khamenei? How do you see – do you see it sustainable for Ahmadinejad to remain president for the next four years?

MR. ANSARI: Well, I think in as much as they played a tactical hand, the principalists have played a very bad tactical hand. They haven't given themselves a huge amount of room for maneuver. I think what you're seeing at the moment is a situation where both sides are taking stock of the situation, seeing whether there is a negotiated way out in terms of the elites negotiating their way out for the system as whole.

I have to say I'm fairly pessimistic about this option actually developing. I don't think really the ability to sort of – given what has happened, and it's not just the election here and the way in which the election was rigged. I think it's the aftermath of the election which has caused deep, deep shock in Iranian society.

You know, Iranians have this wonderful self-perception of ourselves as highly civilized people and we don't like this idea that we go shooting each other and beating each other up in quite the brutal ways that people have seen. And of course, modern technology has had a wonderful hand in exposing a lot of things. I mean, I loved this idea that they've tried to portray the demonstrators as rioters destroying cars and shops and so on and so forth, and yet, by the wonders of YouTube and other things, we can quite clearly see that the members of the police forces were doing a rather good job at this as well.

So there's a real crisis of authority here. And I use the term "crisis of authority" to distinguish it from a crisis of legitimacy because I think there's been a crisis of legitimacy in the Islamic Republic since its inception. I mean, I don't think anyone – you know, there's always been this debate about whether the Islamic Republic is legitimate and, of course, it's varied – the number of people who have supported or not supported or whether they've tolerated or not.

But I think the crisis of authority is – to be a little bit semantic about it – is more serious in the sense that whatever one side says now, whatever the principalists and Ahmadinejad and the others say, I think you've got a great swathe, I would say a majority of the Iranian population will simply not believe them. So to build that trust, as they say, is going to be extremely difficult.

I see the situation deteriorating. I think it's going to get worse before it gets better. I don't see the opposition, as they now stand, relinquishing. There's too much at stake. This sort of stasis that we have at the moment is likely to be punctuated by periodic demonstrations of varying violence.

Every day – it has to be borne in mind every day that the absolute authority of Mr. Khamenei is challenged on the streets, simply by the existence of an opposition, will weaken him. You cannot aspire to such complete and total power, and yet at the same time have an opposition that exists, let alone whatever it does, but it exists and exists very vocally. I think at the end of the day what that will lead to is a hemorrhaging of power. I think it's already happening. I think authority has been severely damaged, but the power itself will increasingly wither.

And the question is how quickly this will happen, how quickly the momentum will gather and how quickly, in essence, members of the elite – and I use the term quite broadly here – but in the clerical classes and the security forces and the IRGC and others, how quickly they will move from one side to the other.

And my reading of Mr. Rafsanjani's Friday prayers sermon was precisely this, to provide the avenue for these people to move from one side to the other, to say, look, you know, as people say, this was the speech that Khamenei should have given, basically. I mean, he should have given a more accommodating – I think people were in some ways pleasantly surprised that he gave a more hard-nosed speech than they expected. But what he was also doing was saying to others, look, we can accommodate. You should move over from the dark side, so to speak. There's a bit of bias for you. So I think that option is on the table. If it doesn't work, and I'm of the view that actually the lines are too rigidly entrenched now, unfortunately, I think the situation is going to get more violent.

MR. SADJADPOUR: I wanted to ask you about – you talk about crisis of authority and we certainly see a crisis of legitimacy in Qom. I think of the 12 most senior grand ayatollahs, only one has congratulated Ahmadinejad. But it reminds me of a friend of mine, Afshin Molavi, recounted this old anecdote that the pope had once criticized Stalin and Stalin said, well, that's interesting. How many brigades does the pope have?

And likewise in Iran, what we've seen over the last several years certainly has been that Khamenei's political base, his most powerful base is no longer the clergy but the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij militia, and if you can talk a little bit about the mindset amongst them. They're certainly not monolithic, but how do you see them reacting over the next few months if this scale of repression continues?

MR. ANSARI: Well, one of the things that – I mean, if we want to talk about parallels, I mean, one of the things that I've perhaps tried to characterize what Ahmadinejad and Khamenei are trying to lead is something akin to maybe the Cultural Revolution that we saw in China and that is by bringing the new young generation of people out and saying, it's your turn to take over and all these old traditionalists can go to the sidelines and either imprisoned or shot or so on and so forth.

But I think, you know, Iran and China differ in the fundamental social structures that it's extremely difficult, I think, to completely overturn, although I've – you know, there's an ideology there, there's a millenarian ideology there that I think obviously Ahmadinejad follows – but it would be extremely difficult to overthrow a sheer religious hierarchy of that nature and completely turn it back to front by having junior clerics coming out and denouncing senior ayatollahs.

And I think this is what worries many of the senior – these senior figures, many of whom, you know, brought from a broad range of political spectrums – some are very conservative – still

find this sort of generational conflict very disturbing. They think it uproots whole centuries of tradition.

And of course, what happened in China under Mao is I think – we have quite dramatically different circumstances than what you see in Iran under Khamenei. I mean, Khamenei himself doesn't have the sort of charismatic clout that his predecessor had. So this is in some ways an attempt – and you see this in the IRGC as well, by the way. I mean, you see this in the armed forces. I mean, one of the striking things about the IRGC is the distinction quite apart from some of the senior commanders who have been appointed by Ahmadinejad or Khamenei in recent memory.

But I've been talking to my own sources and contacts. You quite clearly see the distinction between those members of the IRGC who actually fought in the war and the new groups coming up who they don't really have much time for, to be honest. They see them more as businessmen rather than anything else. And they see them as part of a political establishment, but not really part of a military establishment.

And if you look at the disagreements that have certainly been creeping into the blogosphere and the Internet and other things and people who talk about the divisions within the armed forces and the security forces, it's quite clear that some of this is generational as well as ideological. There are people who are saying that this was not the purpose of the – certainly the Revolutionary Guard.

And there was a nice touch that was said by one – that was reported in one of the papers in Britain where they said that the Revolutionary Guard are here to guard the republic and the revolution. They're not here to guard the leader. This is not an imperial guard of the shah. You know, we're not here to protect an individual. We're here to protect a system. And if we feel that the system is being badly handled by an individual – I know it's sort of a taboo subject, in a way, because they've done very well over the last 10 years to try and cultivate the cult of the leader in some ways, Ahmadinejad – but I think these divisions are rife. And at the moment there is an assessment being made by each side as to where individuals lie.

But there's a lot of things – you know, for a coup – it has to be said, if we read this as a coup, it's a very badly handled coup. I mean, they have not managed to really – most coups should be over in 72 hours. We're now six weeks and the opposition is still – you know, they're still vocal. They're not arresting any of the main leaders. They're arresting many of the second-tier leaders. That's true.

But if you look at why they're not arresting these people is because they know it's too dangerous for them to do it. Moussavi, for better or worse, has enormous popularity now and so do a number of other of these people, so they have to be very careful how they operate. At the moment, they do not have the sort of power that they would like to think they have and they would like the world to think they have.

MR. SADJADPOUR: In the second round, I want to ask all of you about U.S. policy before turning it over to questions. But just one final word I wanted to – you live in the U.K. I want you to offer us some context about the tremendous criticism of the British government from Iran. Why – obviously, you can touch upon the historical context, but why the most recent criticism?

MR. ANSARI: Well, one of the more entertaining aspects of the recent four or five weeks is talking to American journalists who have been querying with me and really curious about why, they say, why have we been knocked off the top pedestal, as if they miss it? (Laughter.) And they go really disappointed. They say, you know, we are used to being the great one and now we are no longer. The British have overtaken us.

I mean, the truth is that the British have always been, in part, for those of us who follow around closely, the British have always been behind the scenes as the great cunning manipulator. And I remember very closely after the axis of evil speech, there was a parliamentary deputy then who got up – the reformist actually at the time, who got up and said, you know, that Bush could never have made such a speech. It had to be written by Tony Blair and so on and so forth. (Laughter.) So these were sort of things that are current.

What I found, though and, I think this is – you know, there are a number of things that coalesce in this. Of course, the British have an embassy in Tehran which helps. It's a very practical target. But I think the Ahmadinejad government has been one of the most Anglophobic governments in Iran of recent years. I mean, they do have something in there that, you know, this is not new for them. They've been doing it for the last few years. They've been trying to seize Gholhak and others.

And I think of course, what they find is obviously they target themselves against the BBC in particular, the BBC Persian Service Television that started, I think, back in February. I think that's had quite an impact. And it bothers them. But, you know, the world has changed. And I always remind people that Press TV has twice the budget of the BBC Persian Service Television and has some very interesting presenters.

So you know, the thing is it's not the same world as '78. It's not the same world of '53. It's not the same world as 1906, obviously. But the Iranians are very, very keen to view that. And of course, if you look at the constitution revolution dynamic, it's obviously in the interests of other great powers in the region to blame the British. So you know, you blame the British as part of the great Western alliance. And it's there. I think it's likely to continue, but it's still – you know, if you want a fake honorary doctorate, you still get it from Oxford. (Laughter.) I think we're quite sanguine about it really. You know what I mean? That's just the way it is.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Great. Thanks so much, Ali.

Now, I want to turn to Roger now. And those of you who didn't read Roger's pieces about the election experience and post-election, I urge you to do so. I truly think that his writings are worthy of a Pulitzer. And you know, of us, he's the one who's most recently been to Iran.

So I want to ask you a little about – if you could kind of talk about the popular mood. I sometimes think that you're better off asking psychologists for analysis on Iran rather than a political scientist in terms of gauging where the popular mood is at. And the second part of that question is that you've had a distinguished career throughout the world. And if you can offer some historical context, comparative context to the situation in Iran and what you've experienced elsewhere.

ROGER COHEN: Thanks, Karim. Just quickly on the British. When I went to see – on my trip earlier this year to Iran in January-February, when I went to the British Embassy and saw the

British ambassador, he said, you know, it's really interesting serving here. It's one of the very few places left in the world where people still believe we have some influence. (Laughter.)

And I also think, in addition to what Ali just said, that one of the reasons for targeting the British – and we can get to this later – is that Khamenei and Ahmadinejad do want to leave the U.S. option open. And great Satanism, while it's been present in the months since the revolution, has been a relatively minor key at least if you compare it historically. And I think when you get the BBC being targeted rather than Voice of America, that says something about the way they're thinking and you look also at what people like velayati have been saying contrasting the European non-acceptance of a nuclear Iran with U.S. alleged acceptance.

Well, it was an overwhelming experience being in Iran for those 15 days which spanned three days before the June 12th election until my departure, by which time I was about I think one of the very, very few Western journalists left in Iran. It was overwhelming and somewhat surreal because I arrived to a Tehran that was festive. Every night on Valiasr there were these great processions of cars going north to south all across the city, people joking and dancing and talking to each other. And it wasn't just that the green wave or the Moussavi wave had unfurled suddenly. Three weeks before the election I think he was dead in the water and suddenly it came alive for reasons we can discuss.

It wasn't just that. There were also Ahmadinejad supporters out in the street. There were supporters of Karroubi and of Rezaii. And I thought that the spirit in which they debated and confronted each other was exemplary. I didn't see any problems at least in Tehran in the three days. And there's a day of silence before the election in which campaigning stops in which posters are supposed to come down.

And it was amazing. All the posters came down across the city and you know, everything looked like we were going to get the most open, vibrantly, even vitriolically debated election in the 38-year history of the Islamic Republic. Accusations of corruption, the whole thing being thrown open, Rafsanjani's fulminating open letter to Khamenei, Ahmadinejad appearing on the last night of campaigning looking absolutely, I thought, disoriented, exhausted, and almost incoherent and certainly like a defeated man.

But in the night of the 12th to 13th, everything changed. And this, I think, is what disturbed everyone profoundly, certainly me and more important millions and millions of Iranians because what we woke up to was a putsch-like atmosphere. I was down at the interior ministry, and Karim's heard me say this. You know, 9:00 a.m., 9:30 a.m. that morning, it was locked down. There were black clad riot police who became very familiar over the ensuing 10 days pouring out of the ministry in the backs of pickups, two to a motorbike.

The Moussavi headquarters is near the interior ministry. I made my way down there. The whole headquarters had already been completely upended. There were phalanxes of bikes going up and down the street. If you lingered for a moment, they were simply beating people to left and right. There were police vehicles going back and forth the main avenues nearby, saying, you over there with the blue shirt. You over there in the hat, move. Get out of here. And it was scary. It was really scary. And it became scarier in the ensuing 10 days.

And, yes, anyway, I ran into a guy from the interior ministry, whose name I know, and he'd been locked out of the ministry. He'd worked there 30 years and he just told me that the numbers were being plucked out of thin air.

So to Karim's question, people – I think if you look at history of the Islamic Republic, people always thought that every four years they've got a chance to nudge things a little. They weren't going to change the regime, change the supreme leadership but they had a chance – it was an Islamic Republic and while the first word was more meaningful, the second was not entirely without meaning, "republic."

And certainly, after the experience of the Khatami years and veering back to Ahmadinejad, it was clear, first of all, that whoever the president is does make a difference in tone and substance. And they wanted their votes to be counted and believed they would be, above all.

So I think what you've seen is a profound shift. And I think I would actually disagree with Ali about this. I think there is a crisis of legitimacy and not authority because millions of people who were in a mode of what I would call reluctant acquiescence thinking – and especially the generation in their 30s thinking, okay. Our parents were revolutionaries. Look what that produced. We don't particularly like this set up. We can work with it. We can push it this way that we can gradually build contacts with the world, develop the economy. We're the coming generation anyway, so as we get older, inevitably, our views will become more predominant.

Those people – and I met many of them in my first trip – have moved into more of a mode where they're downloading manuals on the manufacturing of Molotov cocktails as I've written. They're very, very angry. And I think that anger persists. I don't think it abating. Less of it is on the surface now because the regime is quite effective as I, myself, experienced in propagating fear around it. And I don't think, going forward over the next few months, that that anger is going to go away. It's there.

And as Ali said, the whole situation was – if this was a ballot box putsch, it was a very badly handled one. You know, Khamenei saying, it was miraculous, then saying, oops, there might be a few problems. Maybe we should have this guardian council take a look, then telling the guardian council the result of the recount before it happened, asking Ahmadinejad to be inclusive and then he makes the most divisive speech possibly in world political history when he calls everybody who didn't vote for him hooligans and dust and so on.

To Karim's second question, yes. I mean, I traveled widely but I was neither in China in the 1970s nor the Soviet Union in the 1930s. But you know, I think one thing that produced this situation was – and we can get to this more later – but I do think the policy of engagement from the Obama administration really unsettled the authorities in Tehran.

For one thing, the hardliners definitely did not want control of any rapprochement passing into the hands of Moussavi and the opposition. If it happens, they want to control it. And I think it also exacerbated splits in the New Right – Ray Takeyh's phrase, I think – in the new right it exacerbated splits between the more pragmatic wing of that, the Ghalibaf and the Larijanis, who think that America will always be an enemy but think you can adjust to that and others. So in that sense, I think engagement has worked.

I mean, think what the historical parallels do tell us is that you can have very odious regimes, and you know, both the breakthrough with the Soviet Union in the '30s which came at the time of the great terror and with China which came at the time of the cultural revolution, I mean, they came at a time when the slogans coming out of those countries were at least as vehement and vitriolic as those coming out of Iran today, and the bloodshed, to state the obvious, was considerably worse. So, you know, there's nothing that rules out a normalization with a hostile power.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Let me – we're going to go back to the U.S. question, but I want to kind of press you on this point as I see it – as you said, there's tremendous popular outrage which has remained and the regime does repression very well, and you know, as I see it now, there's millions of people who are angry but they don't know how to channel that anger and so they're keeping it on simmer at night, with these nightly protest chants of "Allahu Akbar" reminiscent of the 1979 revolution. But they're looking for leadership.

The problem is that the reformers' brain trust, as you yourself – it's the phrase you used, they're either imprisoned, under house arrest or unable to freely communicate. And which of these two – there's a symbiotic relationship in the sense that you have this outrage but it requires leadership. How do you see that evolving? Is there someone we're not talking about now who might be able to merger? Or what about Moussavi himself, what is his role in all of this?

MR. COHEN: I think – I haven't seen actually, Karim, now that I think about it. I probably missed it, but I haven't seen a good piece on Moussavi post-June 12th. There's an enigma there that I think about sometimes. I don't think he has led sufficiently. He certainly didn't seize the moment.

One thing you realize when you're in a crowd of three million people as I was in the Monday after the election that fear evaporates. You go into a crowd like that fearful but when you're with three million people, the force is with you. You can't have a Tiananmen Square with three million people. And if those people led had wheeled around and marched on the palace on Khamenei, I don't know what would have happened. But I do know that on that particular day, the Iranian people were unstoppable. And Moussavi was there and Khatami was there but they didn't say anything or they didn't say enough.

I clambered up on an overpass above Enqelab Avenue to try to get a sense of how large this silent throng saying all the time sokut, sokut, silence, and just marching with this incredible dignity and power. And the whole thing was vibrating and it was the one moment where there seemed to be some panic because people were saying it might collapse.

But I got up there and I looked back toward Enqelab Square and west toward Azadi. And there was no end to it. And it was subsequently calculated that number is the number that Ghalibaf used having looked, I guess, at images. And so it was an extraordinary moment. And Moussavi didn't seize it.

And then, on the Thursday, there was another very big crowd. Now it's six days after the election. It wasn't three million people but it was hundreds of thousands of people marching, starting in Imam Khomeini Square, marching to Ferdosi and then wheeling left toward Enqelab.

And as it happened, Moussavi passed three feet from me with his wife as I ran about. And they were in a pickup, in the front of it, and he was waving in this almost “cute” way is the word that comes into my head. And she was too. And everybody else had their arms up and the crowd was going – there was one moment when the silence broke and everyone was going crazy around me. And again, he was silent.

Now, was there some deal he’d struck that he could be allowed out of house arrest but he couldn’t actually address the crowd? Was it his own decision because he thought it might be too dangerous to whip a crowd so large into a frenzy? Was it because he’s just not capable of that and only his wife is capable of that, because I saw her do that before the election and she is certainly capable of it? You know, what is going on with him? Why has he not been arrested? And why not stand and die? I mean, stand there and the “die” bit there is metaphorical. Stand or be imprisoned, you know, and then if you’re imprisoned, clearly that’s a very galvanizing factor.

So, you know, as in the Khatami years, I mean it hasn’t collapsed, obviously. And he’s been putting out statements and so on. But there’s been something missing. And Rafsanjani is always kind of the ultimate enigma, right, and that speech was neither a cave in nor a battle cry. It was somewhere in between and I think that – all that in-betweenness leaves this great mass of people wondering a little.

MR. SADJADPOUR: That’s very well put. Turning to George now, yesterday there was a hearing at the House and I kind of commented that for the first time in 30 years, the U.S. government has now prepared itself to recognize the legitimacy of the Iranian regime right when that legitimacy has now been squandered.

So we’re in this difficult situation whereby we don’t want to reach out to Iran and betray the millions we took to the streets and the opposition when, as Roger and Ali and others have stated, this movement is far from over. At the same time, Iran presents these urgent national security challenges. To quote the administration, there’s a nuclear clock which continues to tick.

What are the new dynamics of the nuclear situation as you see it post-election? How would you advise the administration to move forward on this? Is it possible to reconcile these two points of not wanting to immediately engage for fear that we would implicitly endorse the election results and pour water on the opposition while at the same time keeping in mind these urgent national security challenges like the nuclear issue?

GEORGE PERKOVICH: Thanks, Karim. I think on the first question of how does the election affect it, it’s very simple or I’m simplistic about it to say that basically it makes it harder for all sides, at least in the near term, it clearly makes it harder for the Iranian government. I think they took a long time and had a real struggle between say 2002 and 2005 to figure out their strategy, have everybody unified around it and then they’ve got a consensus which even Khatami represented so it was before Ahmadinejad came to power. Khatami is the one that said we’re going to break the freeze. And so they’ve marched forward with that consensus ever since which was hard to come by.

So now, you’ve got an even harder consensus making process in Iran, whatever the number of people that would be involved in it is and I agree with all of you. I mean, I’ve said all along at various time it wasn’t clear they knew what they wanted. So whether or not we could figure out what they wanted, if they didn’t know what they were going for, it was a little hard to get it exactly

right. And so, what we're asking of the – what is needed is a change of that consensus. And so that may be more complicated and more difficult. On the U.S. side, I mean, everybody who lives and works here has a sense of the complexity added by the recent election.

I think, to answer your second question, which is more important, I think, you know, it's possible to overcomplexify (ph). I think the president has it right and has had it right all along which is that regardless of the struggle in Iran, that it's very important to proceed and try to deal diplomatically on the nuclear issue.

And, very importantly, that negotiations aren't a concession. I mean, there's an understanding in the administration, it's also with the French, it's also with the Russians, it's also with the U.K. – and I assume the Chinese – that the Iranians actually haven't been negotiating since late 2004. They have shown up for talks and Jalili then reads a long diatribe, but there's been no give and take and no acceptance really on the Iranian part that there's going to have to be a movement by Iran as well as by the others.

And so, what the administration is seeking in a negotiation is actually a preparedness by Iran to have give and take. That would require a shift by the government of Iran. It's not a zero sum game that if you get into this, the Iranians have won. It would be a process that if you get into it, everybody is going to have to give up a little something in order to get something so it's not this big concession that would be offered to the Iranian leadership.

I would say, what are the downsides? Well, one thing is the Iranians don't actually negotiate. They may show up but they don't negotiate. Well, in that case, what's the downside? You point to it that they actually didn't negotiate. The U.S. is there willing to negotiate, a much more credible president comes out and says they didn't negotiate and then the Russians come out and the French and everybody else comes out at witnesses saying, yes, they didn't negotiate. So you're then in a stronger position to further isolate this government and Iran.

Now, the flipside is they actually do negotiate and say, right. We've got what we wanted. We've enriched. We're prepared to ask – to do what you're asking, which is to further delineate that it's only a peaceful program, to verify that, et cetera. Okay. What's wrong with that? It seems to me the world becomes a safer place at that moment. All sorts of risks that we're concerned about are reduced.

And, I would argue, it eases the way for the reformers to gain within Iran for the following reason and this you can learn a lot of ways but one way is to look at the experience with the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. There's lots of cause and effect, but I would argue that the nuclear arms reduction process with the Soviets, '85, '86, '87 culminating in a treaty to eliminate intermediate-range nuclear weapons from Europe, that process greatly helped the opening politically in Russia. So two years after the completion of that treaty, the Berlin Wall falls and you have this opening.

Well, why? Well, all repressive governments justify the repression by a foreign threat. They're out to get us. They're penetrating our system. They've been overthrown and things like that. Well, if the top of your state is negotiating with those people and doing given and take and actually explicitly reducing threats, it's a little hard to come home and say, now, we've got to bash all these heads because the enemy is at the gates. You're negotiating with them so it, I think, loosens up a system, makes repression more difficult.

So for me, I don't see the downside other than on talk radio and in Congress and the United States but if you follow the guidance of those leaders, we all go to hell or hiking in Appalachia or whatever – (laughter) – but it doesn't solve the problem.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Let me ask you, George – that's a very good point, by the way, you made. But let me ask you about the question of timing. And from your vantage point thinking about the nuclear issues, a nonproliferation experts, what are the costs of waiting several weeks or months to see when and if the dust settle, A? And B, how realistic is this September deadline which the administration has ostensibly set in order for the Iranians to respond if there's still tremendous tumult and you haven't really even formed a government yet, how realistic is that timeframe?

MR. PERKOVICH: I don't know. And I've heard different ones. I've heard there's the G-20 meeting. I've heard the end of the year. It's not clear even what the deadline refers to. In other words, there hasn't been a new specific proposal, substantively, proposal put to the Iranians.

I think the issue is respond to the overture to engage directly and say yes, we will negotiate directly with you or talk directly with you. And I think whether it's September or not, I think their view is that that ought to be a decision that the leader can make that in principle he's prepared to designate people to come talk to the U.S. But I don't think the deadline is for specific substantive answer.

Why wait? Well, I think while all this is going on, Iran is adding centrifuges. They're enriching uranium. So the material concern is there. They are not cooperating with the International Atomic Energy Agency. They are not answering to questions that have been outstanding to the IAEA. They're continuing to try to import components and so from an international security standpoint, the material threat that's been of great concern, that's still moving forward. That says you don't pause. You know, we've been waiting a long time for Castro to change. So you know, these regimes can hang on. Governments can hang on a long time. And on core national security issues, I think you don't really wait.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Tell me actually, before I turn to the audience now, the regime may not be in a position, may not either be in a position or may not be even interested in reciprocating engagement or be prepared to make any compromises on the nuclear issue. As George said, they may be prepared to show up to meetings but that's different than negotiating. How do you see them emerging from this in terms of their foreign policy orientation?

MR. ANSARI: Can I also just make one point of clarification just because Roger mentioned about legitimacy and authority? I think – I was going to say that I think across of authority the way I'm interpreting is worth a crisis of legitimacy. I mean, I think they've had a crisis of legitimacy from time immemorial in various segment of society. So I didn't want you to think that it's – I think it's far worse in terms of the ability of the system to be able to direct things in a way.

But in terms of it, I mean, we have this discussion obviously in the U.K. as well about engagement and other aspects of it. I actually think, and obviously, if you're going to have a dialogue or an engagement, you have to have someone to talk to. And I've always felt that actually Ahmadinejad and the administration that he represents does not offer any one particularly good to talk to.

As George has also said, I mean, they spent the last four or five weeks basically blaming the West for all the ills in society. They could be very bold and suddenly reverse that and say that well, actually what we need to do is get some sort of constructive deal with the West over the nuclear issue and deliver something. But I doubt it and I doubt it because I think the two sides are talking different languages.

So on the issue of engagement, I don't think there will be anyone to engage with. I mean, this is the problem you're going to have to face. And yes, I think they will send individuals. I think it will be important for them to be seen in public and in international forums. I think Ahmadinejad likes nothing better than to come to the U.N. and to chat and to have the motorcade and so on and so forth.

But I think in terms of actually doing anything constructive – and this has been something that I've worked quite closely with in the U.K. in terms of having the right people at the table to be able to talk – I mean, you don't have to agree on many different issues. Many people, when we talk about the nuclear issue, there are hugely – I mean nobody even on the reformist side is going to suddenly give up on all sorts of things on the nuclear issue but at least they're talking in the same language. At least you know you can start on the same base and try and work on something.

But I think, actually, the current principalist administration as it stands and as it goes forward really does not speak that language. And you can see this, you know, from every time I think Mr. Ahmadinejad has been to the West, for me, one of the favorite documents is the assessment, the official assessment of his speech in Colombia. I mean, he thinks it was a marvelous success. And the way they portrayed it, it shows that they're talking in a different – there's a different system of logic I think is the best way to put it.

And I think that is going to make life extremely difficult, I mean, extremely difficult. And from our perspective, the offer must be there. But I think we also have to be realistic about who you're going to be facing across the – and I think if Solana has to see Jalili another time, he might give up altogether if he wants to listen to his thesis yet again, I mean, I don't know it's – not the best thing to talk about when you want to get onto more serious issues.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Roger, how do you see things? Is this a false bargain between waiting or engaging right away or do you see a distinction?

MR. COHEN: I don't think there's anything to engage with right now. I think there's complete turmoil in Tehran and trying to get a lid on this. And you know, fortunately, August is coming and so we'll see in September when people go to the beach, I guess, perhaps not in Tehran in fact.

But what I would say is that one thing will happen in August presumably and that is that Ahmadinejad will form a government and you know, I think we need to look – I think they have two options. I think the first scenario, the most likely one is that the hardliners will just tough it out and we'll see another hard-line government.

But there is the option of recognizing that massive blunders have been made. There's a major problem of legitimacy and authority and one way to resolve that would be some kind of

Zimbabwean-like maneuver where you try and bring some of the opposition into the government. So we need to watch carefully if Jalili come September 1 is still there. If he is – yes. It would appear that if he is still the chief nuclear negotiator, it would appear that there really isn't much hope.

I suspect – and there's a lot of disagreement about this – I suspect that they will – I think actually, George, the invitation, the September deadline is for the P5-plus-one I think rather than bilateralism. It's for the – it's for the nuclear talks. And I would suspect that they will try to spin that out, that they will in some way respond positively to that and we'll try to see in reaching out a little bit to the world a way to again, try and calm things down a bit.

But you know, I'm really – I'm pretty pessimistic like Ali. And I think what we're going to see is the core test of a new Obama doctrine which was spelled out by Hillary Clinton a few days ago. And the phrase I took away from that was you know, moving from a multipolar world to a multi partner world. Well, can Obama with all his charm, with all his outreach, with all his intelligence and curiosity, can he multi-partner in ways that are other than rhetorical? Can he bring on the goods? Can he, confronted by Iran now, multi-partner in a way that actually gets the Russians and gets the Chinese to come on board for measures that would meaningfully hurt – and I mean meaningfully, you know, meaningfully hurt Tehran.

And again, I'm pretty skeptical about that. You know, Tehran is awash in Chinese products. The Chinese get 15 percent of their oil. And both China and Russia view Iran through their broader strategic prism which has been precisely to create more of a multipolar world, to diminish Washington's influence and to embarrass Washington in Iran and thereby attain that broader strategic goal. So I think we really are facing the core foreign policy test of the Obama administration's new approach to the world.

MR. SADJADPOUR: We'll now move to the audience. If you can identify yourself and please try to be concise. We have a good 35, 40 minutes for questions. I'll take two at a time. The white shirt in the middle there first. Please wait for the microphone.

Q: Thanks. Michelle Moghtader with the National Iranian American Council. There've been many questions regarding sanctions and the U.S. implementing new sanctions on Iran. How do each of you feel personally about broad or targeted economic or political sanctions on Iran? And for those of you who have contacts in Iran, have the people there thoughts about sanctions on them?

MR. SADJADPOUR: Let's take one more in the front here. Please.

Q: Oda Aberdin (ph). I think President Obama has an edge over the regime. He has the respects and the admiration of Muslims. And I think it will be very difficult for the regime to challenge Obama at this moment because they will isolate themselves further in the Islamic region and that's – I think the regime takes into account.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Ali, do you want to start?

MR. ANSARI: I think more sanctions are going to come whether we like them or not. I mean, I think the way it's developing is that you're going to find that some sort of action is going to have to be – will take place. Because, to go back to the nuclear issue which obviously predominates

here in the West in general, you know, Ahmadinejad has said the file is closed. So there's not a huge amount that he wants to discuss about that.

So, I mean, in order to sort of create the environment in which you want to see results in Iran, I think there are several options that we've taken, some better and some worse. I would say, in relative terms, but I think probably the sanctions, tightening or targeted sanctions, I would suggest is pretty the more likely way forward.

In terms of the sort of crisis of authority, I was talking about, of course, is what you find in the post-12th of June environment. You'll probably find more support for these types of actions in Iran than you would have beforehand. I mean, that's just the reality that people are increasingly fed up with the way in which things have taken place.

I would add, however, that I think often the threat of sanctions probably does the trick rather than actually enacting them. I mean, the Iranian economy wasn't in good shape before we went into this election. So it's not going to get any better in the current circumstance and I think the sort of the sense of uneasiness, uncertainty, not knowing where you're going – we know there are capital flows out again – it's one of the things I wanted to – you know, when you look at the future, what Karim was asking me earlier, the economy is also one aspect of the whole system that is under serious, serious pressure. They're determined to get to a sense of normality. It's not going to get there.

On the Obama factor, I would just say that probably I get a sense that over here we tend to play too much as if we think Obama has a greater effect in Iran than we think. I mean, I think he – definitely – there is an effect there but I don't think that actually Khamenei pays too much attention to whether Obama is popular or not. And I think they – there are dynamics that are internal that have encouraged various things to take place. And Obama I think is marginal to that, to be honest. Their popularity in the Arab world or in other areas is – he's a challenge. There's no doubt about it. But I don't think he's pivotal to their decision making in that sense. And they're not too worried about what people think. I think they've shown that quite clearly, to be honest.

MR. SADJADPOUR: George.

MR. PERKOVICH: On sanctions, I think a couple of distinctions are worthwhile. One purpose of sanctions is to change behavior so either the threat of sanctions, and so you change their behavior in order to avoid the sanctions or else you try to get them to change because of the pain of sanctions.

But there's also some times where sanctions can be useful to punish an actor even if you've given up on the idea that you're going to change their behavior but it's punishment because the alternative – you're trying to defend a principle and set an example for others and the alternative would be, either bombing them, which you don't want to do, or nothing, which creates the wrong incentive.

So it's often said, well, sanctions don't work. It's not going to get them to reverse the nuclear problem. Well, that may or may not be true because – you know, we can argue about that. But there's also an argument that even if that were true that you might do that for punishment to be able to try to prevent others from following that course, number one.

Number two, the United States has clearly demonstrated that congressionally mandated unilateral sanctions don't work and generally backfire. And as a general principle I think they are really a bad idea. On the other hand, we have experience where U.N. sanctions really do carry both the kind of message of political isolation and have a greater potential of economic impact because if they become binding, there's a greater chance of enforcing those.

So I think – and I think the administration understands that and so that's the point of the diplomacy with Russia and China and changing the course and offering the engagements so that if Iran doesn't negotiate the administration's theory or its desire is at that point that it's easier to get Russia and China to support sanctions even though I agree with Roger about the broader context in which they see their interest.

Finally, I think the financial sanctions which are done much more cleverly by Stuart Levey at Treasury and others that those are a good idea and you know, ought to be encouraged.

Lastly, on the importation of gasoline and refined products which I guess there's now a desire in the U.S. to try to sanction, it seems to me – I'm not an expert on this – but it seems to me that that would make the Revolutionary Guard's day, that if you try to sanction or embargo something that many Iranians want and would be willing to pay for, and you can control the smuggling, you're going to get very rich as a result of those kinds of sanctions. So I don't understand the theory of how that's a really good idea.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Roger?

MR. COHEN: Yes. Well, sanctions, as George has said, have not worked, neither U.S. sanctions, nor the weak U.N.-mandated sanctions. They're regarded in Iran as a surtax, basically, and everything they need comes in through Dubai and the Chinese and the Russians have gone on trading. And basically, you have a body that is largely inoculated to sanctions and you have to introduce a pretty powerful new virus to really affect that body, I think.

So I'm pretty skeptical about sanctions. I think the only way, as I just said, that you could possibly envisage sanctions really having some tangible effect would be if the Russians and Chinese – if Obama can really say, look, I've tried everything. They're just not interested. You don't want – and I don't think the Chinese and the Russians really do want a nuclear armed Iran. They don't.

So at some point, that calculus becomes more clear. Look, I've really – and that is what the administration calls the backend. There always has been a backend to this policy which was, okay. Now we all get together and punish them, but the proof is in the pudding and we're not there yet. Will Moscow and Beijing – and again, I'm fairly skeptical and it would have to be pretty draconian, shipping, insurance, U.N. mandated, really cutting off Iranian banks, really stopping refined petroleum products getting in and I don't myself see it happening.

What I do think is happening that could affect the Iranian calculus is – I mean, I broadly agree with you. I mean, I do think Obama has had a pretty dramatic effect in the Muslim world. And we've had eight years of Iranian ascendancy under an American government that consigned Iran to the axis of evil and so it made it easy for the rather nimble Ahmadinejad to attack the arrogant power. And that was his brand really.

Well, he's got more problems now with his brand because when he comes out and talks about religious democracy, ethics, this new world order that he and Jalili dream about with the downfall of the capitalist West and all that. What's going to roll in people's heads is going to be the video of Neda Agha Sultan, blood spilling across her face and her eyes blanking and her death in that video that went global.

He's also confronted by an African-American president of partly Muslim descent who has reached out to the Muslim world. I think Ahmadinejad is a weakened figure and Iran is somewhat weakened with oil at 60 compared to 145 a year ago. And the economy in – and let's not exaggerate it but it's certainly dipping. And the oil windfall was largely wasted.

And there's this anger in the country that's going to be there and if the Obama diplomacy can begin to price Syria way, can begin to show some progress in Israel, Palestine, can begin to treat Hamas, Hezbollah in a more pragmatic, I would say, objective way, you know, if all those things happen, I think the Iranians could feel a bit of a draught coming through the region.

And the assumption that this ascendancy would simply continue might be called into question, then they might start to think, well, maybe we really we do in the real world, in the globalized world, need to make a few compromises on the nuclear issue which would be linked with a whole lot of other issues.

MR. SADJADPOUR: In the way back. Yes. Way back. The gentleman in the suit.

Q: (Inaudible, off mike) – Washington Prism, World Security Institute. I want to piggyback off of Roger's comment and bring Ahmadinejad into the mix. As some of you may know, the current crisis in Iran, of course, Mr. Ahmadinejad's choice as first minister who would replace him, should anything happen to Ahmadinejad and even though Ayatollah Khamenei has ordered him to get rid of this very controversial figure, Rahim Mashaei, who made a comment about Iranians being friends of every one including Israel and so forth. He so far has not backed down. In fact, the conservative Web site Alef that's counting the days since Khamenei had ordered him and he's avoiding that.

So I'm wondering – as if Khamenei needed more challenge and now he's facing this, what is the relevancy of Ahmadinejad U.S. rapprochement, nuclear negotiations, and the future direction of the Islamic Republic, any of you gentlemen, that would be fine.

MR. SADJADPOUR: We'll take one more in the front here. Gary please.

Q: Thanks. Gary Mitchell from the Mitchell Report. I'd like to probe a little bit on this notion of the backend. And put the question in this way, I hope. It seems to me that what we're looking at is two national interests. In this case, somebody used U.S. and Iran.

We have two national interests that are dueling with each other. This is a statement, but think of it as a question, that the national interest of Iran is to maintain power, and the national interest – for the regime to maintain its power. That's their interest. That's their national interest. The national interest of the United States and the West is to negotiate, to achieve particularly some progress on the nuclear issue. Let's assume worst case scenario which is the hard-line cabinet is

formed. Jalili stays. Nobody is going anywhere. We're at the backend in which case we do sanctions on steroids.

Isn't it – if the assumption about Iranian national interest is correct – and that's a question – don't we know that once we reach the backend, they unleash their Hezbollah, Hamas meddling in – in other words, they ultimately – question mark – when we get to the backend and we think we're about to hit them with a two-by-four, they've actually got more leverage against us than we do on them. That is a series of questions.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Yes. Very good. Roger, why don't you start off?

MR. COHEN: Ahmadinejad I think – I think he's a very significant figure generationally in his early '50s, the generation that fought the Iran-Iraq war, that came away from it with this commitment to the Islamic Republic, the mysticism, the strange ideas of really steal the revolution for export in some ways and changing the world. And there's a group of people around him, on the religious side, Jannati and Mushtaba Khamenei, and others, and I think he will probably continue to have considerable influence over the course of things.

I do think that he's clearly the most divisive figure probably in the history of the Islamic Republic at this point, most divisive single political figure. There are deep pockets of hatred/dislike for him all across the board within the Majlis where less than half turned up for his celebration party, in Qom, among conservatives even of the more moderate school, and I don't know exactly what's going on in the Revolutionary Guards and elsewhere but I imagine that's reflected across all the institutions. So would there ever come a point where it's deemed he should be sacrificed in the name of some unity? I think that's possible but remote.

To your point, Mr. Mitchell, I think it's a very good one. And I do think, you know, if we go back to – if we get to the backend and we get to really trying to ratchet up sanctions in a very tough way, where are we? We're kind of back to Bush, you know. We're kind of back to square one. That's it. We've tried engagement, been there, done that; didn't work. And you know, we're back to Condi and Nick Burns scrambling around, you know, trying to get meaningful sanctions and as you say, there's leverage on the other side.

So I think everything should be done to try to avoid that outcome. And I think diplomatically, as I just said, Obama does have some means at his disposal. But I just hope it doesn't come to that because clearly, as we withdraw from Iraq, we are vulnerable – all the reasons for the engagement, Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel-Palestine are still there. The strategic imperative, if you like, is still there but if we go the sanctions route, then I think we're inviting more instability in Iraq.

And so we've really, really, really got to test the waters, I think. I'm assuming they are going to come to the table in some form in September. I may be wrong but that's my assumption. Shortly after September and then we'll just have to see. We have means to hurt them too. We have overt means and covert means. So two can tango.

MR. PERKOVICH: I would just pick up on that. I agree. I think they don't have more leverage if it gets to that. And the key is if you actually can get Russian and Chinese agreements so that there is a backend. I mean, otherwise, that's what we're arguing about in perpetuity is there even something there. But if you can get them – I think there's actually – there's significant

leverage. The Iranians have some too but they have to be very careful about how they play and I think we have more and Roger alluded to some of them.

But the biggest lever is now the internal fractures within Iran. That changes the calculus for them. It gives a lot more things potentially to be alluded to, played to, and so on. I don't think we go back to Bush because I think Obama in the world is very different from Bush.

I mean, if you look at the contest from 2002 – well, even earlier than 2002 onward, it was basically a contest between, was the world more afraid of Bush or the Iranians? And clearly they were more afraid of Bush. And so Iran was able to do a lot. Well, if the contest comes back that way, is the world more afraid of Obama or the Iranians who are cracking heads and everything, I think that calculus shifts.

And then lastly, I mean, I think there's evidence that the Iranian government was in fact very worried about the guard's capacity to control the population in the aftermath of an Israeli bombing on their nuclear sites. And that there's indication that for the last – more than the last year, they were concentrating on developing that capability which it turned out they used in June to do crowd control. So the idea that actually a military threat or the military strikes would be a unifying thing in Iran, I think the Iranian leadership itself isn't so sure about that.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Good point. Ali.

MR. ANSARI: Well, I'll try and be very brief. I think Rahim Mashaei, which is quite interesting – I mean, I read the recent thing as he said his comments were purely psychological warfare against the Israelis apparently. So however you want to interpret that. I think what it does show is that there these divisions even within the principalist camp which are quite serious.

I mean, this thing, the fracture that George has been saying, is all over the place. And just to emphasize this, you know, the greatest threat in a sense to Iran's economic and political development shall we say is actually Mr. Ahmadinejad. This is the gentleman who has not done a particularly good job over the last four years but there are close, personal, and ideological ties that bind a particular group together and they see themselves in this particular sort of – they see their future within this particular worldview.

But you know, in terms of sanctions, some of the sanctions have worked. Some of the banking sanctions clearly have worked, some of the restrictions that have taken place which are mainly bilateral or EU-directed have had an impact in Iran. But again, it's based and predicated on the fact that the country has been mismanaged. I mean, it just has been mismanaged. I mean, if you have this oil boom and you look at the oil reserve fund Ahmadinejad has left the country with, it's a fiasco. It's a fiasco. And most people will acknowledge that when they look at it.

So if you look at the problems internally, I think George is quite right. The problems internally are self-created in many ways and these are the source of many of the issues.

And it's a question, in a sense, if you wanted to use the term "engagement," it's a question of engaging with these new realities and being able to adjust oneself to the fact that actually there are – you know, there are changing realities in Iran itself. There's definitely leverage here but there's leverage that I think has to be U.S. based. I mean the EU has leverage. The EU has not actually

been able to get its act together in quite the way that necessarily perhaps it should have. Some countries are more belligerent than others, but we know that, you know, basically to get the EU in a more rigorous role, you have to get the Germans and the Italians on board in a much more consistent way.

But once that happens, that will put a lot of pressure on them. I mean, there's no doubt about it. This is a trading country. It needs to trade at the end of the day. So it needs people to trade with and Chinese and Russian goods aren't the things that people normally want to buy.

That's just the – this is the way it is. I mean, it's just a reality. It's like I said, if you want an honorary doctorate, you get it from Oxford. I mean, they know where their bread is buttered. And yes, they may tolerate certain things but they know that for their oil industry they're not going to get what they need from the Chinese.

MR. SADJADPOUR: We have about 10, 15 minutes. And so it's time – I'll take three questions now before we wrap up. Right in the front. Please start out in the front. Yes.

Q: Hi. Jill Parillo, Physicians for Social Responsibility. George, I was wondering, if Congress passes sanctions on companies like Total in France, how will this affect the P-5 plus one process? And Karim, Roger mentioned that in August, Ahmadinejad will form his cabinet. Is it not parliament that appoints his cabinet? And what will the significance be if the cabinet turns out to be 100 percent conservative when the parliament is far from that? Thank you.

MR. SADJADPOUR: In the way back, please. Well, yes. Chris. Please.

Q: I'm Chris Isham from CBS. I have a question and follow up for Ali. You have predicted a situation in which we'd have continued instability, continued stalemate here. Is that in our interest, in the interest of the West and the United States and if so, is there something we could do to perhaps make sure that that turmoil continues?

MR. SADJADPOUR: And the gentleman right in front of you.

Q: Thank you. First of all, thank you so much for having such an excellent top notch stellar speakers today. It's incredible. But my question is, just to follow up on the comments that were made, the first issue is we've been here before. We've seen the Iranian government actually just drift when it comes to these negotiations. And the question is: How do we get them to the table?

Quite frankly, the way the administration has been addressing this issue – it seems to me, first of all, it's morally wrong when they say that yes, we do condemn the violence that has happened in Iran, but on the other hand we're willing to deal with this regime. I really can't think of any other instance whether it was after Tiananmen Square or whether it was after violence in Kenya, or in Zimbabwe, where the Western world said, well, this is really incredible but this is a good opportunity to actually engage.

And so even if it comes to nuclear weapons, I don't think that's a good policy. I don't think that's a good moral policy and neither is it good diplomatically. Diplomatically, if you do want to get them to the table, there are other means to do so. Obviously, the first choice wouldn't be to do away with sanctions because that's not very effective either.

But why not perhaps change the channel instead of just talking about the nuclear issue, why not make this a different issue, not play on their ground but refine the issue to ask the leadership right now, and this is something that President Obama is incredibly good at. He's very good at public diplomacy. So why not refine the issue or refine the question to be to ask the top leadership in Iran whether they're interested to actually engage with the international community?

If you do so, I think you're challenging the supreme leader, you weaken him, you get him on the ropes some more. It's something that the reformists in Iran, I think, would very much welcome. And I think it's something that the public would react to very well.

So I was wondering if you could comment on that, whether we should just keep playing the same game or whether there's any opportunity to change the approach? Thanks.

MR. SADJADPOUR: That's a great question. Why don't we go reverse order now: Ali, George and then Roger can have the last word.

MR. ANSARI: Right. I definitely think that things need to be refined and changed according to circumstances. I mean, I don't think you can continue along the same path given what has happened since June the 12th. I mean, there's no doubt about that.

My reading of it is that while there is a state of shock in many areas in Iran, I think there's also a certain amount of reflection and thinking and perhaps not so much thinking allowed but certainly a reassessment going on in the West because it is a very difficult problem. I mean, there's no doubt about it. How do you address this on both a practical realpolitik level and how on a moral issue?

And I think this has yet to be settled but I agree with your premise that it can't be business as usual. That's – and there are many other ways of addressing some of these issues and maybe using, as you said, the public diplomacy. And this is where Obama would have, I think, certain advantages to be able to address. So I mean, that's something that needs to be resolved, but I agree with you, your basic premise.

On instability, whether you – I don't think it's actually in anyone's interest for Iran to continue to be unstable. On the other hand, again, it also ties in in some ways to what the last question was saying. I don't think also – you know, we have a very difficult problem in terms of who do we – you know, do we accept the Ahmadinejad government if and when it is formed as the legitimate government of Iran when vast swathes of the country do not believe that and including many members of the senior elite. It's a very difficult issue to be engaging with.

I know that the elements of solidarity and this sort of the public solidarity that's taken place has been of an enormous benefit to people, I think, in Iran. I think they know that cutoff in some ways because the international media has been locked out and the Internet and other things have been very useful. But I think the European Union and the United States has to think very carefully about how it approaches this issue of the legitimacy of the current government and the current system and what has been going on.

It's a difficult one. I don't want to say now basically what – what I would it's not something that should be reached a conclusion on. I know it's a very difficult issue. I mean, I know what my personal interest would be but it's one that obviously each state has its own interests and needs to seek to try and resolve these. But you know, all I can say is for the Obama administration is I bet they were hoping at least for some sort of clear result on the 12th of June and in quite classically Iranian way, we've now delivered the most ambiguous option that anyone could want. (Laughter.) So if anyone thought that any administration was going to have an easy time in Iran, well, you know, it's not going to happen.

On the cabinet, if you want a cabinet, no. I mean, the president nominates his cabinet and the parliament has to ratify them. But they've already said that they're probably not going to ratify a great number of them. And it all depends who he's going to bring. I suspect he's going to bring a very hard-line cabinet in. I don't think he's going to be inclusive at all because I don't think any of the people on the other side want to be part of this cabinet.

I mean, it's not something that – Moussavi made it quite clear recently actually. He said to me, nobody is going to work with him. So he's going to be stuck with his family relatives. I mean, Mahai, is his son in law. And you know, he's going to be stuck with some real die hard loyalists.

But again, this may not be to the satisfaction of some members of the – I don't know, the two groups of principalists these days, you know, the moderate principalists and the hard-line principalists, I don't know. But the moderates might decide that they don't want to. It's going to be very difficult. I think you have a dysfunctional government, more dysfunctional than usual and it's going to be difficult to govern at the best of times. But it may be that we don't even get to this stage in any meaningful sense.

But they will want to show the outside world an air of normality. That is what they are going to try. They are determined to show that and I think in terms of how the West approaches it, I think it's just very useful to remind them that nothing is normal, that what has happened post-12th of June, you are not going back to the status quo ante-election. Things have changed.

MR. PERKOVICH: On Jill's question about Total, I think Congress shouldn't do things for which they aren't prepared to take responsibility. France has been the hardest core of the other interlocutors with Iran in terms of pressing on the nuclear issue, pressing the world the way the U.S. saw it in Iran, absolutely stuck to the hip with the U.S. and actually leading on this.

And so to unilaterally legislate something that would entail sanctions on Total without working that through a diplomatic process with the government of France, with the EU, is the height of irresponsibility I think and then it leaves you with the choice of what's happened in the past, which is the government then doesn't enforce the sanction, which allows the Iranians to look and laugh and say, you see, they had but they won't even back him up. Or if, in this case, you did enforce it, you would have a backlash against your closest ally on this issue.

On the question of about – basically why negotiate this, I don't understand the difference between being willing and actually engaging in negotiations on the nuclear issue versus what you were proposing about the president and asking, inviting the leader to engage the international community. It's the same thing, it seems to me, and again, I think we have to clarify what's going on here.

I mean, negotiations aren't a concession. So if you're not rewarding this government, you would be challenging it in many ways to take steps that it hasn't been willing to in actually engaging in a negotiation, and moreover, if you do that, as I said earlier, it helps the reformists because that same government can't turn around and blame the outsiders and justify repression based on the outsiders.

So I don't understand, and then finally, the Tiananmen thing, yes. There was a mass occur in Tiananmen and as far as I know, the U.S. governments had a lot of dealings with China since then and the Chinese have never apologized for it. They never made restitution. They never changed their human rights policy in major ways.

It's the reality of the world is you have things you've got to get done. You have to go deal with the people who can get them done with you. We may not like it. We generally don't like it but if there's a nuclear problem in Iran, who else are you going to talk to except for the people who could make a decision to change that policy? And I don't think that's a concession. I think that's a clear international interest.

MR. COHEN: Well, to your question, sir, first of all, the moral repugnance of what I witnessed in Tehran will remain with me for the rest of my life. There's something about seeing state licensed thugs who have been given a truncheon, a stick, a helmet and a shield.

And I remember this woman outside Tehran University, slim woman in her 20s, I would say, and she'd just been beaten and her arm was blue and she was clutching around. I remember another woman staggering off the street who was bleeding and we tried to help her and she was not having any of it. She was going right back into it.

And what happened and is happening is absolutely morally repugnant. And none of us should forget that and we should go on talking about it and writing about it and communicating about it.

I think the administration was – I think the president was two days at least behind the curve in his escalating series of statements about the events. If you look, as I looked, the other day at the statements, by day six, the Thursday, by which time there were already people dead, the most he'd found it in himself to say was that this was of concern. The events were of concern to him and to the American people. That was it.

And I think the reason for this is exactly what Ali said. There were all sorts of things planned for, Moussavi victory, Ahmadinejad victory, but not this. And the president had been thinking about engagement since early in the campaign. This is deep in him. This means something to him. He's been reading about Iran. And you could almost see, well, hang on. We've got memos here, and so what do I say.

So I do think there was a failure there and certainly he misspoke, as Karim commented, powerfully when he said from the U.S. national security perspective there was difference whether it was Ahmadinejad and Moussavi. That's, I think, just wrong in terms of his feel for the situation because people were dying for what Moussavi stood for and actually I think it's a wrong appreciation. I think they are quite distinct.

All that said, as I said earlier, I think it is engagement that has unsettled Iran. And so this policy in a way produced not directly but it had a real indirect impact on what emerged.

And if we turn your question around and imagine that the administration had gone the other course – taken the other course and said, this is absolutely morally reprehensible. I said in my inaugural that if a fist is unclenched, I will extent my hand. Well, you are clenching your fist in ways seldom seen so I'm withdrawing my hand and the offer of engagement is off the table. And if you reread the inaugural, I mean, on the moral plane, I mean, that paragraph has just been utterly belied by the response to what happened in Iran.

But if you imagine that the administration had done that, that the president had done that, where would we be? I think in a way we would cut off our hands to spite our faces because I do think that, you know, this policy has and will continue to unsettle the government and also gives more room for maneuver in some ways for the opposition, for Moussavi.

There's nothing to be done right now because of the confusion that prevails but I still come down on balance toward thinking that the president misspoke. He was late in getting to a certain emphasis in his condemnations. They should have been there much earlier and much more powerfully from the Monday, from the day there were three million people in the street. And those are mistakes. But the overall decision to not walk away from the idea of engagement, I reluctantly believe is the right one.

MR. SADJADPOUR: Unfortunately, we're out of time. But I wanted to thank you all for coming and please thank the panelists. (Applause.)

(END)