

Berlin Conference Puts on the Table A Bold New Proposal for Iran

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

As became clear in the course of a conference held in Berlin on March 27-28, which brought together various sides of the conflict, relatively straightforward alternatives do exist, to the threats of military aggression against Iran voiced by the neo-conservatives around Tony Blair, Dick Cheney, John Bolton and company.

The conference, organized by the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, addressed "The Nuclearization of the Broader Middle East as a Challenge for Transatlantic Policy Coordination." Along with representatives of leading U.S. think-tanks, like the Center for Strategic and International Studies and RAND, and academics from Europe, a high-level Iranian delegation participated, as did two Israeli analysts. Political representatives of all the parties in the German Parliament summarized their positions on the issue, and diplomats from Egypt, Germany, and the United States wound up the discussions with their recommendations and warnings. A particularly important contribution was made by Dr. Tim Guldemann, the former Swiss Ambassador to Iran, who presented the International Crisis Group's (ICG) concrete proposal for solving the conflict, a proposal endorsed at the conference by Zbigniew Brzezinski, U.S. National Security Advisor under President Jimmy Carter.

One problem besetting the discussions was the assumption that Iran has nuclear weapons, or is fast on its way to having them. Speaker after speaker presented diagrams and aerial photographs of Iran's nuclear installations, at Arak and Natanz, for example, accompanied by maps showing the range of Iran's missiles. One Israeli speaker warned that, were Iran to attain a missile with a range of 4,000 km, it could even hit London.

Though such a degree of uncertainty exists regarding what Iran actually possesses, the consensus among the think-tankers was that the danger exists, and that Iran must be forced to give up its uranium-enrichment program, on grounds it could one day lead to a weapons capability.

U.S. Military Options

Sam Gardiner, a retired U.S. Air Force colonel, delivered a reality shock to the conference, by arguing the case, that the United States "is very close to being left with only the military

option." Gardiner listed seven assumptions embraced by those who make such decisions, about Iran, including: that it is developing WMD, supports terrorism, is active in Iraq and Afghanistan; and furthermore, that sanctions won't work, and that the Iranians want regime change. Gardiner went on to present pressures on the U.S. Administration to go for a military strike, including the incomplete intelligence estimates, the deteriorating Iraq situation, and so forth, all of which fuel the drive to act sooner rather than waiting. The scenario he presented, saw the United States moving in the United Nations Security Council for sanctions, merely "to convince the world that the United States has tried diplomatic solutions." After this, the United States would come up with some "smoking gun," and move to a military operation. It was not the specific military options he outlined which shocked his listeners, but the fact that he quite confidently stated that, "The evidence is pretty strong that the U.S. policy makers have already picked the military option."

As for consultations with allies, he was as blunt: "The new relationship with the German government is nice, but the U.S. military will not share its plans with the Germans. Plans for military options will not even be shared with the State Department," he said. In remarks to *EIR*, Colonel Gardiner said he believes that there are people in the State Department who are serious about negotiations with Iran, over Iraq, but that more decisive are statements by U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad, accusing Iran of meddling there, and accusations by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, charging Iran with being the "central banker of terrorism." Such statements, bolstered by new "revelations" of Iran-al-Qaeda links, are all part of the propaganda push to prepare for war.

Another retired military officer, Gen. Hermann Hagen, treated the military option seriously, outlining likely military and economic consequences. Michael Eisenstadt of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said he could "not rule out" the military option.

Iran's Stance

The Iranian position, outlined by Deputy Foreign Minister Dr. Manouchehr Mohammadi, Ambassador Dr. Ali Asghar Soltanieh, Permanent Representative to the International

Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna, and Ambassador Dr. Seyyed Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour, deputy head of the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic to the UN in Geneva, was unequivocal: The country will *not* give up its right to the entire nuclear-fuel cycle, including enrichment of uranium. Not only because the NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty), which Iran has signed, allows this, but also because Iran does not want to be dependent on outside sources for nuclear fuel. The nuclear program has been there for almost 50 years, and there is no way it will be dismantled.

Dr. Sajjadpour contrasted the ambiguous depictions of a nuclear threat, as presented in the various maps, charts, to the reality of pressures on Iran, going back in time, and Dr. Soltanieh urged participants to exploit the presence of the Iranians, to clarify doubts, and get the real picture. There is an “awareness gap,” whereby those outside the region do not understand its realities.

What will happen in the region, if the military option is implemented against Iran, emerged in dramatic form from the speech delivered by Dr. Mohammadi. His analysis stressed that the “crisis and security challenges” of the region derive mainly from the interferences of “trans-regional powers,” especially the United States. In his view, the “lack of understanding, or misunderstanding, of the realities of this region,” on the part of outside powers, had led them to oversimplify, and in a “reductionist” manner, to view matters solely from the standpoint of security.

Due to these considerations, Dr. Mohammadi said, the region was being pushed toward what he called “permanent war:” “As a person who speaks to you from this region, my feeling and impression is that one more serious miscalculation can throw the region deep into the uncharted territories of a ‘permanent war,’ a situation that no one stands to gain.” Therefore, he urged outside powers to strive to gain a better understanding of the region and accept its realities, while leaving the regional actors to deal with their problems themselves.

A Bold Proposal

How to break the deadlock between the two apparently irreconcilable positions?

Dr. Guldemann, the former Swiss Ambassador to Tehran, presented an intriguing approach, worked out by the International Crisis Group. Starting from the assertion that currently there is no flexibility on either side regarding enrichment, and no mutual trust, the February 2006 ICG study sees little probability that the “best option,” i.e., stopping enrichment, is possible. If, in response to this fact, sanctions were to be imposed, or a military option implemented, it would lead to “total disaster.” Therefore, the ICG proposes a second-best solution: in the first phase, lasting two-three years, Iran would suspend its enrichment activities until the IAEA were able to clarify all open questions. Iran would also suspend plutonium activities, and its Parliament would ratify the additional proto-

col to the NPT which the government had signed, allowing for invasive inspections. Iran would benefit from enhanced trade cooperation also for its civilian nuclear program. After the IAEA had completed its work, in this phase, it would continue in a second phase, to ensure that no undeclared nuclear activities were being conducted. Iran would be allowed a low-enrichment scheme with a certain number of centrifuges. The low-enrichment uranium produced would be delivered to the Bushehr plant as fuel rods, and intrusive inspections would protect against possible diversion.

The key to success of this option, Dr. Guldemann stressed, lies in Washington: If the United States accepts a cooperative approach, then Tehran’s attitude may change as well. (See interview below.)

Dr. Guldemann’s proposal provoked a stream of objections. One speaker doubted the “practicality and effectiveness” of the ICG approach; another exclaimed this constituted “betrayal” of Israel, and demanded Iran be forced to recognize Israel as a precondition for any talks; another recalled the case of Brazil, which had moved towards a military program; another blurted out that “the second-best option is the worst,” and so on.

Thus, it came as a shock that none other than Zbigniew Brzezinski, the featured speaker in the evening session, should endorse the ICG proposal. For Brzezinski, the danger of an Iranian military program lay in the prospect that others in the region would imitate it, thus proliferating nuclear weapons. But he stated bluntly that Iranian possession of nuclear weapons would constitute no threat to the United States, which could respond with its deterrent; and Israel, a nuclear power with a huge arsenal, would retaliate. Considering that Iran is surrounded by four nuclear-armed neighbors, he said, one could expect Iran to get such weapons in the future.

To solve the problem, Brzezinski proposed that the United States move from a position of a “quasi-negotiating process”—whereby it is talking to the EU3, which in turn talks to Iran, etc.—to a real negotiating process, emulating the six-party talks on North Korea, with direct U.S. participation. A precedent can be found in the Bonn talks on Afghanistan, in which Iran played a positive role.

The mere notion that a military option is on the table, Brzezinski characterized as “counterproductive” and an impediment to serious negotiations, unless one really wants the military option. Better, he summed up, to delay any Iranian military program, if it cannot be prevented.

The former Carter Administration official also located the Iran crisis in a broader context, which he said should be addressed simultaneously. First, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, where the United States, to show its commitment, must activate the peace process. He called for the United States and the EU to codify in a single statement the key elements for an agreement.

At the same time, he urged resolution of the Iraq crisis, referencing his own four-point plan for disengagement. Re-

ferring to President Bush's recent statement, that the Iraq crisis would be resolved by his successor, Brzezinski said that the Administration is privately discussing disengagement in Washington; they do not disagree, he said, but they have to find a way of calling it "victory."

In sum, the ICG approach should be adopted, in tandem with reactivating the peace process and disengaging from Iraq. In answer to questions about the ICG, Brzezinski announced he was a member of the board. Queried on the military option, again he said it would be a disaster, and one should consider how much one is willing to pay. The military option is "serious," he quipped, in the minds of those who propose it, but, "are they serious minds?"

The Berlin conference was not the venue for negotiations. Speakers presented their views as personal, not official. All were "participants," not "representatives." Such a format, in fact, is what made it possible for such a vast and frank exchange of views to occur. Although there were no statements of commitment for the ICG approach, there were indications, on the Iranian side, that the offer is appealing.

If there were a desire, on the part of the current administration in Washington, and its London cohorts, to solve the ostensible "Iran crisis" politically, peacefully, and diplomatically, the ICG has provided an initial draft of how they might proceed.