



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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New America Foundation

“A Grand Bargain with Iran”

1630 Connecticut Ave NW, 7 October, 2008, 12pm

The New America Foundation hosted a discussion featuring **Flynt Leverett**, Director of the Geopolitics of Energy Initiative at the New America Foundation and former Senior Director for Middle East Affairs at the NSC; and **Hillary Mann Leverett**, CEO of Stratega and former Director for Iran and Persian Gulf Affairs at the NSC. They discussed the prospects of a comprehensive diplomatic rapprochement with Iran. The event was moderated by **Steve Clemons**, Director of the American Strategy Program at NAF.

Flynt Leverett began by noting that Iran will continue to be a major foreign policy challenge for the new president. **He said there is a vital need to reorient U.S. policy toward Iran in the same way that Nixon did toward China.** He said that over the last thirty years, each U.S. administration pursued three policy goals regarding Iran: diplomatic isolation, economic pressure and sanctions, and thinly-veiled support for regime change. **He noted that it is an undeniable reality that this strategy has failed under any definition. Iran is not diplomatically isolated, and the strategy has done nothing to advance U.S. interests in the region.** Further, US-Iran tensions are now a source not only of regional instability but a danger to global national security.

Leverett said that Iran is an influential and strategically important country. An improved relationship is not only desirable, but a necessity, as the U.S. cannot secure any of its regional interests without Iranian cooperation. **He said that a fundamental change in policy is needed, not through incremental change, but with a thorough rapprochement through a grand diplomatic bargain. He called for the U.S. to put all major bilateral differences with Iran on the table and resolve them as a package.**

Under the bargain, **Iran would address U.S. concerns about WMD; support for terrorism; opposition to a negotiated Arab-Israeli peace settlement; and problematic role in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. would normalize relations; recognize a legitimate regional and international role for Iran, and extend a security guarantee to the Iranian regime.**

Hillary Mann Leverett said that too many scholars and officials view the Iranian regime as immature, unhinged, and promulgating an irrational, apocalyptic ideology. But she noted that it has a clear history of responding rationally to advance its own interests. **We clearly disagree with Iran’s strategic and tactical decisions—support for Hamas and Hezbollah; uranium enrichment—but such decisions cannot be said to be irrational.**

Mann Leverett noted that there is a twenty-year history of instances of tactical cooperation between the U.S. and Iran, most recently Iran’s decision to close its border to fleeing members of al-Qaeda following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. She said that Iran believed that each

instance of tactical cooperation would lead to a broader strategic understanding with the U.S. This never occurred because of U.S. concerns of domestic political blowback. **She said that a grand bargain is the only approach that can resolve all outstanding issues, because it is the only approach that seeks to do so. Mere détente or incremental change will not work.** She noted that while seemingly everyone calls for engagement, sitting down and talking is not enough. Without the right agenda, talking can do more harm than good.

Asked if the current relative diminished power of both the U.S. and Iran presents a good environment for a deal, Flynt Leverett said that relative power doesn't matter as much as realizing that what we have been doing for thirty hasn't worked. He said the president must be prepared to weather any domestic political blowback. Hillary noted that past tactical cooperation between the U.S. and Iran occurred amid often violently tumultuous times. **She said that rapprochement is a permanent feature of Iranian foreign policy.** It has clearly been expressed sporadically and unevenly, but it has always been a strategic imperative of their national security interests.

Mann Leverett was asked about the absence from the bargain of any concerns for human rights and democracy promotion within Iran. She said that Iranian dissidents familiar with the proposal think that it sells out their agenda. She agreed, and admitted that this deal primarily serves the security interests of the U.S., Iran, and Israel. She said the hope is that we first secure a robust national security pact, and later look for openings for democracy and human rights issues. She said a broad strategic understanding is better for everyone's human rights than trying to bludgeon Iran into improve its internal situation. The need for a comprehensive reorientation supersedes human rights and democracy.