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Brussels Forum

The Iran Conundrum

Mr. Craig Kennedy: Okay. I think we're ready to get going for this last formal session of today before we break for dinner. If you think back on Brussels Forums over their history, this topic, Iran, has always been central to it. Some of you remember the night owl that Javier Solana and David Ignatius did, which I think was supposed to last for an hour and went on for about two-and-a-half hours. You can remember some of the other sessions, but this has been one of the hearty perennials of the Brussels Forum.

It's only fitting that we ask David Ignatius, a well-known expert on Middle East politics, columnist for *The Washington Post*, sometimes associated with the German Marshal Fund, as well, to be here and lead this discussion with a really extraordinarily good panel. So, David, it's all yours.

Mr. David Ignatius: Thank you, Craig. It's

wonderful to be here. I hope we won't ruin people's appetites for dinner by talking about a very complicated, dangerous subject. I want to first introduce the panel because there were some late changes.

First, on my immediate right, Dr. Ziad Asali, who is the head of the American Task Force on Palestine. He's a physician who's practiced abroad and in the United States.

Next, I'm going to introduce next Nick Burns, who is a professor of diplomacy at Harvard's Kennedy School, fittingly, a professor of diplomacy because he was one of America's best diplomats for many years, last serving under Secretary of State.

To his left is Isaac Herzog, who is a labor party member of the Knesset, is a member of the foreign affairs committee of the Knesset. He serves currently as a major in the Israeli Army Reserve. He has served as a cabinet member in the Kedemah Coalition in several positions, and he is also, I would note, the son of the

great former Israeli President, Haim Herzog.

Finally, I want to introduce our last panelist, who is replacing, as you'll note from your schedules, Philipp Missfelder. This is a sign of European interdependence that at the 11th hour, and I literally mean that, we found a wonderful person who could take over. Camille Grand is director of the Foundation for Strategic Research in Paris, a think tank that advises the French government on policy matters. He has a background in arms control. He's served in both the French Foreign Ministry and is an advisor to the Defense Ministry. So we're especially glad that he could join us on late notice.

Let me just introduce this subject in the briefest way because we all spend so much time thinking about Iran. Every time I talk in public about this subject, I tend to cite my mentor, Graham Allison, a professor at Harvard who has described the confrontation with Iran as the Cuban Missile Crisis in slow motion. In other words, over a period of years, the west and Iran have

been moving closer and closer toward a confrontation that, if we can't find a way to resolve it short of military action, could lead to a very explosive military confrontation.

As you know, if you read *The Washington Post*, Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta and other officials of our administration think there is a strong likelihood that Israel will take military action against Iran between, he said, April and June. That's probably more specific than anyone would want to be, but you can set your watches to Leon Panetta's.

Those comments proceeded a very important visit to the United States by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. And I'm going to use that really as my last comment to set up our discussion. Prime Minister Netanyahu came with this issue of will Israel attack before it sees Iran entering a zone of immunity. President Obama met with him but also gave a very important speech to APAC, a pro-Israel lobby. And in that speech, he said that it is the policy of the Obama

administration to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. He's never gone that far.

He also talked about his policy saying that it is not a policy of containment, that we are not in a position where we're ready to wait for Iran to get a weapon, and then through strong defenses, contain their use of nuclear weapons.

And he said, emphatically, quoting President Theodore Roosevelt, "Speak softly and carry a big stick." And this was a message not simply to Prime Minister Netanyahu but to the Israeli public. So I want to begin with Isaac Herzog and ask you, Isaac, whether Israelis believe President Obama's promises and what the mood is in Israel as this confrontation, as this slow-motion version of the Cuban Missile Crisis, drifts further along?

The Hon. Isaac Herzog: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much and thank you, David. Look, for the past few years, we would open up the TV sets or radios in Israel in the morning and hear

another speech of another Iranian leader declaring that he wants to throw us and eradicate us and end the existence of the Zionist entity and so forth. And we would go on with our daily affairs. For the past few years, the Israeli public has been prepared for war with drills. Unending drills, including national drills for emergency home front attacks of all sorts. And yet, we would go on with our affairs. Namely, Israelis, all in all, having heard so many threats in their life, were in deniability.

A month ago, as I was lecturing to a high school class in Tel Aviv, at the end of the whole question and answer, the last question, a student gets up and says to me, a girl, "Do you think we'll have war in June?" That was the first time I heard a youth really asking about Iran. A month ago. What happened in Washington was a culmination of a process which you just described parallel around the world.

Namely, nobody believed it, so there was constant deniability about it. Now, it looks serious. It looks

ever more serious. It started looking serious, actually, with an ongoing parade of American dignitaries coming into Israel in order to calm the Israeli leadership, but in fact they've actually raised the anxieties of the general public.

And it continued, of course, with the international peak that we are seeing in front of our eyes. And then comes the question, are we alone in this or are we not alone? And I think that following the summit in Washington, Israelis understand more and more that it is really seriously a problem of the international leadership as such, and not only an Israeli problem. You see it in the polls. Recent polls show that the Israeli public would support an attack, but they outright don't support an attack if it's not with the blessing and coordination of the United States.

And finally I want to say that in my mind the outcome of this summit has set a new or an amended policy which there is clear coherence or closeness between Israel, the United States and Europe or the P5

plus 1 and the whole club that deals with this. And the policies as follows. No containment, that was clearly a very important declaration by the president, which the Israeli public wants to see it in order to believe it. Two, all options are on the table. Three, Israel has the right to defend itself. Four, on its part Israel accepts the idea that there is another window of opportunity for international maneuvering and efforts to get the issue resolved. That's how I see the current situation on behalf of the--or from the Israeli point of view.

Mr. David Ignatius: And so would I be right in thinking that the net effect of the Netanyahu visit and the statements that were made was that it made an early Israeli attack less likely because of the commitments that President Obama made?

The Hon. Isaac Herzog: I cannot say it's less likely in terms of the Panetta timetable. There's a lot of psychological, I would say, warfare going on and there's a lot of spins going on. It's all part of it,

too. But all in all I would say the following, that everybody agrees, the general consensus in Israel is that military option should be the last option but it should be there. It should be there and seriously. And what they tend to disbelieve is whether and how far will Obama and the Europeans go if they need to go to war. That's the question mark that looms over everything and it's lack of trust whether the Americans are so forceful to adhere to their words. You said there would be no containment. Let's see you making sure there's no containment if at the end of it all you're bluffed by the Iranians.

Mr. David Ignatius: So, Nick Burns, you were the person who was responsible for our Iran diplomacy for Secretary Rice for a number of key years and I want to ask you about what is currently the core of U.S. policy, which is the campaign of escalating described as crippling sanctions. And I want to ask you as the professor both in terms of experience and what you do in your classes whether you think that this is gonna

work. I mean, economic sanctions have a history of failure. Is there any reason to believe that these will work?

Prof. Nicholas Burns: Well, David, thank you. Let me say first I think there's been a high degree of integration between the policies of President Bush and President Obama. A lot of people may not realize that because there are a lot of differences in foreign policy between the two. But President Obama has taken the main articles of President Bush's policy towards Iran and I think he's strengthened them.

I think because of his attempted outreach to Iran in 2009 he brought the international community closer together and isolated Iran. And particularly in the comments that you've referred to that president made to the APAC Conference three weeks ago and his interviews that week he recentered American policy in a very tough and very clear way.

He, in effect, positioned us closer to Israel in all the ways that both of you have discussed. No

containment, we'll prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power, we have Israel's back. But he made another very important statement that week and I thought it was even a passionate statement on his part. He said, "We have to believe in diplomacy first." There's a time to use force perhaps, if all else fails, but we haven't tried diplomacy. I mean, think of it this way, we haven't had, the United States, a single, sustained conversation with the Iranian leadership on any issue since the Jimmy Carter administration. Each administration has had a brief, episodic, desultory meeting in Vienna or Geneva that's ended in a day or two.

And so the fact that we might go to war with a country that we do not know, we don't understand its leadership, we have no idea what their bottom line might be, if a deal is even possible, is very disturbing. And I think the president has a lot of support in the country that we ought to be at the negotiating table. And we hope that--the administration

hopes that talks will start next week.

Sanctions is just a part of it and the object of sanctions, I think the Bush administration believed and the Obama administration believes, is just to get Iran to the negotiating table. If sanctions fail, if China and Russia and India don't step up to join with the South Koreans and Japanese, the Europeans are doing, that I think increases the likelihood of war. So the pressure's really on China, Russia and India to make sanctions universal, isolate Iran and get them to the negotiating table.

Mr. David Ignatius: I want to look at the current instance of diplomacy, Camille, which is the Iranian response to Catherine Ashton, the EU Chief Diplomat, who had sent Iran a letter proposing the negotiations and laying out some questions she wanted answers to. The Iranians are now said to have replied positively, but I'd be interested in your evaluation and what you sense is the evaluation of the French ministries as to how seriously we should take this. Is this a play for

time by Iran, as many people think, or do you see this as the possibility of the beginning of a real diplomatic opening?

Mr. Camille Grand: Well, past experience don't speak for Iran. We've had experiences of resuming talks and realizing that the Iranians were coming with no agenda for even serious talks. So it is very difficult to assess where they are sitting at this particular juncture.

And Lady Ashton, who's negotiating on behalf of the U3 plus 3 or P5 plus 1 depending on how you prefer to call them nevertheless maintains this sort of (inaudible) policy of tightening sanctions but having this open-end attitude towards negotiation.

So the key issue here is whether the sanctions have started producing enough effects on the Iranian economy, on the Iranian leadership, so that they actually have opened the debate within the regime on trying to--that negotiating might be a better path and that they might--that the alternative to non-

negotiating path is worse.

But we should bear in mind that while these talks might resume and Richmond continues, other sensitive activities continues, missile testing continues and (technical difficulty 10:22:29 - 10:22:33) the time we have two races at the same time (technical difficulty) and at the (technical difficulty) thresholds after one another and us being in trouble with that.

Mr. David Ignatius: Let me just turn back to Nick for a minute because this is the kind of moment (technical difficulty) you know well from your time at the State Department, what's your assessment, Nick, of whether this Iranian response is for real and how do you think (technical difficulty) of P5 plus (technical difficulty) window of (technical difficulty)?

Prof. Nicholas Burns: --that all of us have, particularly the United States, is that we don't have a good sense of the thinking of the Iranian leadership. It's not a monolithic political culture. In fact, it's a highly divided polity environment. What does the

supreme leader intend to do? Is he trying to achieve a nuclear weapons capacity but will stop short of actually constructing a nuclear capability, a nuclear device? Does he believe that there's a deal that can be made short of war that they can (technical difficulty) in the Bush years President Putin actually on behalf of the P5 plus 1 offered that we would help them construct a civil nuclear regime. We would control the enrichment process, they wouldn't do that, strict international guidelines. The Iranians turned that down.

So I think what you should look for, if negotiations start, a degree of clarity and seriousness on the part of those Iranians representing not Ahmadinejad, the Supreme Leader. That will be apparent, I think, in the first couple of days or perhaps the week. But we've got an obligation and a self-interest here, too.

My sense is that these talks will be protracted. They'll take months, if not years. We've gotta believe in the capacity of diplomacy to find a way forward,

exhaust it before we turn to war. There'll be calls in my country, for sure, within a couple of weeks if talks have not succeeded that the president's failed and we should then turn back to war and that would be a serious mistake.

Mr. David Ignatius: Welcome to the 2012 campaign.

Prof. Nicholas Burns: Exactly.

Mr. David Ignatius: I mean, you could already hear them. Ziad, let me turn to you and ask you about a wild card in this situation and that is the revolt that's taking place and is being brutally suppressed in Syria, which is Iran's only Arab ally and arguably is the key strategic point of leverage here. I'd like to ask you your thoughts about how that plays into the Iran situation and also what you're hearing and sense about Arab public opinion as they watch this big drama play out?

Dr. Ziad Asali: Well, as you said, Syria has been a strategic ally of Iran for a long time and more recently under Bashar it has become a junior strategic

partner. But it has offered Iran an ideal mix of hard power and soft power where it cooperated fully on security arrangements between Syria and Iran and as a proxy for Iran with the other security sub-agents in Lebanon like Hezbollah or with Hamas when it worked with them closely and Jihad Islami, which is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Iran. All of these have depended heavily on the relation with Syria so it would lose tremendously if--Iran would lose tremendously if it loses such an asset.

Another thing is the Arab Spring, Iran tried to spin the Arab Spring as something that's quite comparable with its long-term anti-Western and resistance move. It called it Islamic Awakening, not Arab Spring.

Clearly the result of that was at least in the North African sector, which is another successful operations, have yielded a more anti-Iran version of Islam than it ever expected so that added to the protracted and brutal war in Syria Iran has a huge

problem with its strong support of the regime while it actually killed so many people. So there is a loss, an erosion, a bleeding of sympathy for Iran across the Arab world and that's not talking about, you know, the immediate neighbors of Iran.

Mr. David Ignatius: People sometimes say, Ziad, that that's a reason why Israel or Israel and the United States should take military action now, that this is a moment of great weakness for Iran. Sometimes people sense that the Sunni regimes of the Gulf are whispering, stage-whispering, "Do it. Come on. Do it." And I'm curious whether you think that's true and, second, what would the Arab public opinion as a whole say about that, "Do it," option?

Dr. Ziad Asali: I think there is a clear support for a potent action on part of the United States against Iran in the ruling Gulf areas across because they really are the vulnerable people to Iran possessing nuclear weapons. Israel, with all due respect, is capable of defending itself on a nuclear

level and has very strong strategic partners who would act very quickly if there's any threat to Israel.

The Arab Gulf'ees, all of them, are going to be at least intimidated politically to the point of really at last providing Iran the (inaudible) that it has seen for centuries. So to them it's an exceptionally important issue. I think moving from that to action would depend on the conviction of people that it is going to be a successful operation and that the consequences have been thoroughly understood especially considering what happened in Iraq and the unfolding of very unfortunate consequences to a successful, immediate operation. And I think there is a little bit of a need for reassurance that the process and its consequences have been studied thoroughly and coordinated and, in fact, coordinated with the Arab leadership before action is taken.

Mr. David Ignatius: If I understand what you're saying between the lines it's, "If you do it this time do it right." In other words, "Get it done," and don't

leave it dragging in ways that make us more vulnerable.

Dr. Ziad Asali: That's a good thing to say about anything.

Mr. David Ignatius: Indeed. So, Isaac, to turn back to Israel and the choices that it has to make, it often seems to me that at bottom what Prime Minister Netanyahu and his key advisors have to decide is whether they trust the United States as their protector or whether in waiting for the United States to act, and we have munitions that give us a much longer, much, much bigger window within which to act, we could wait until next year if it's said if sanctions fail to produce the result. Or whether Israel feels that that process of depending on another power, even its best friend, the United States, is a mistake, that Israel has to show that its prepared to defend itself. And I'm curious how you evaluate those two poles on the Israeli public.

The Hon. Isaac Herzog: Look, Netanyahu has been preparing the Israeli public since he got back from the

United States. As to the alternative of operating alone, I think he's doing that for various reasons. One is, of course, to maintain his options seriously. And two, in order to make it clear to the world that this option is viable.

So he made a bunch of interviews in Israel as he landed, and thereafter made a very impressive speech at the (inaudible) where he said, look, the Americans didn't like when we attacked in Iraq. Winston Churchill understood what happened in Germany, you know, the whole narrative of World War II and the rise of Hitler and so forth and so on. And this narrative works on Israelis. Okay. It works on Israelis. Their national phobias emerge. The stories of people's lives emerge, and it's there, it's hanging in the air and it's clear.

Now, on the other hand, I would love to be a fly on the wall out there in the meeting between Obama and Netanyahu. Because if I were in Netanyahu's place, I would say to the president, can you commit that if I don't do it, you'll do it? And if then, by which

timetable?

Now, I don't know if this has gotten to such an intimacy that they could speak so frankly about it, but if Israelis would be sure that the, you know, America would lead the affair, they would be more relaxed about it.

I will say something else that may interest this public here. Since we don't really know the details, none of us--or very few people are in the club that knows the intricate details of the capabilities, the zone of immunity, the options, and the timetables, and the discussions, so people on the public level revert to humor.

The most popular TV show, which is a satirical one in Israel called, "Eretz Nehederet," the great country, every week has a skit about Iranian nuclear scientists who when they're playing and they're trying to build a bomb, and they have a timetable, but they really want to go on date with their girlfriends and they miss the timetable, the deadline. And this is where we are now.

That's what the public deals with. They don't really know how far it will go. They have doomsday scenarios. They have other scenarios. They clean up their shelters. There are drills. People talk about it. They made the headlines. But there's nothing else they can do. It unravels in front of the whole world theater and none of us know at which point it will culminate here or there.

Mr. David Ignatius: There was a view, probably most forcefully expressed by an American journalist named Jeffrey Goldberg in an article in the Atlantic Monthly that said that Prime Minister Netanyahu was likely to take action because of a deep sense of Israeli's vulnerability and that this was a Churchill moment, this was a moment to protect Israel's security decisively.

There's another view that there's a lot of gaming here, that people have gone so far, Jeffrey Goldberg has changed his view a little bit to say that maybe Netanyahu was bluffing a little bit. You know

Netanyahu, have grown up in the culture of Israeli political leaders.

The Hon. Isaac Herzog: Yeah, I was (inaudible) in his government until a year ago.

Mr. David Ignatius: Tell us what, I mean, your view would be more interesting than anybody's. What do you think about--how do you judge Netanyahu's statements?

The Hon. Isaac Herzog: Netanyahu is driven by historical perception. He's the son of a historian who has researched the inquisition against the Jews in Spain. He has a clear view of the world, a view which in my mind is gloomier than the view which I feel as a younger politician, leader, a social democrat.

And I think President Obama depicted on this beautifully on his Atlantic interview when he said, look, the differences between me and Netanyahu are that he's a right-wing--he's a leader of a true right-wing coalition. He comes from a certain school of thought, and I come from the center left, and I come from a certain school of thought.

Now, Netanyahu is driven by a deep sense of history, but nonetheless as you--and I say it objectively, despite the fact that I'm one of the main leaders of the opposition in Israel and I run the Labor Party faction in the parliament, that Netanyahu is also a cautious person. I mean, in his current government for the last three years he's been quite careful in what he has initiated as opposed let's say to the Olmert government which had two wars.

So I think all in all, none of us envy Netanyahu. We know that it's a very difficult decision, and I think that where Israelis are now in the political system in Israel is that it says the following. This program cannot be allowed in any way. If need be, we will all unite together, but give a chance to another venue to take its place, to take its space and see where the outcome will lead us in the next coming months.

And that what was said by Netanyahu, this week in parliament he said, time is short, it's a short time

span, but hinted, of course, that he agrees to give this window of opportunity.

Mr. David Ignatius: That's fascinating. Nick, you and I took part in a war game that you helped prepare at Harvard looking at what would happen as the ladder of escalation was climbed in a confrontation with Iran. One of my takeaways from that was that the Israelis would not be likely to trust American guarantees.

There was a story in the newspapers just last week about a secret CENTCOM war game, and the decisive conclusion of that was said to be that if Israel starts actions, however unilateral it claims that action is, the U.S. will be drawn in.

And I just would be interested, you've played a lot of games, public and private, to try to play out these strategic options. Share with us what you think about what would happen in this ladder of escalation.

Prof. Nicolas Burns: Well, David, let's unite the Harvard war game with the fly on the wall conversation. And what I would hope that Prime Minister Netanyahu

would hear, what I would expect he'd hear from an American president of either of our parties would be the following. We have enormous sympathy for Israel's strategic predicament, and given Jewish history and given the ethic that binds Israelis together, you have an absolute right to take seriously these extraordinary statements from the Supreme Leader and Ahmadinejad about wiping Israel off the map of the world.

We are Israel's greatest friend, and we will defend Israel in a shooting match with Iran. We'll protect Israel. But the next message is, but please don't get ahead of us and please give us some space. And we would like an understanding that Israel would not use force without the agreement of the United States ahead of time.

We are prepared to use force. The president's statement three weeks ago is very significant. It's the clearest, toughest statement he's made. He will use force, is the way I read it, if all else fails. But all else has not failed and there is a window. Iran is not

close to a nuclear capacity yet. And so let's threaten, let's sanction, let's be tough minded, let's be prepared to use force, but let's at least explore, and it may not work, the possibility that there may be a way, working with Russia, China and the European (technical difficulty 10:39:17 - 10:39:22) in some kind of diplomatic arrangement that may take 6 to 12 months to work out.

I think that's a conversation that we ought to be having with Israeli leadership. I hope we have had it. And again (technical difficulty 10:39:35 - 10:39:38) and I'm a non-partisan/bi-partisan person. I think there's been a high degree of integration between our two political parties. I don't see a lot of difference between Republicans and Democrats. And I think President Obama has very skillfully isolated the Iranians. Why would Israel want to interrupt that right now? It would be a great mistake.

Mr. David Ignatius: I thought I heard Isaac saying that Prime Minister Netanyahu heard the message and is

giving a little bit more time than he might have been willing to earlier. Let me turn to Camille and ask the question that I think often goes unasked, which is okay, so we're on this course for crippling sanctions, and they're pretty tough.

Here in Belgium there's the well-known clearing house for payments known as Swift, which is now implementing an absolute ban on money transfers by Iranian financial institutions and those facilitating their commerce. It's a very serious move. Europe has announced that it's not going to buy oil from Iran, which could really have an effect on their oil sales. So let's suppose for a moment that these are crippling.

Countries that are crippled sometimes lash out, like, you know, we think of animals that are wounded. They don't just take the punishment. And so curious as a strategic analyst running a think tank, have you done any thinking about what this crippled Iran might do and how do we then respond to that?

Mr. Camille Grand: I guess that the first thing is

that the Arab Spring has made the Iranian options more limited, and that's the good news, because many of the options that were discussed of Iranian reaction to either crippling sanctions or limited military action were to use proxies. So to use the Syrians, to use Hezbollah, to conduct either terrorist operation or start another conflict closer to Israel.

I believe that with the current sanction regime, the good thing is that it drives their economy. It drives their financial means as well. Therefore, also their ability to do things. They've started doing certain things that they were not doing in the past as covert actions and resulting to terrorist attacks on Israelis (technical difficulty) things like that, as a sort of response to the ongoing covert war.

But having said that, I think their options are fairly limited, because, I mean, if they don't want a conflict, the worst thing they can do--and it was quite telling that the threats on the Strait of Hormuz that were expressed, were very quickly withdrawn, because

they know that would justify a military action on them very quickly. And that's probably the single one (technical difficulty).

So I don't think they have that many options. You know, the effect on the (technical difficulty) taken place. And in fact, if you look at the trends, it could improve in the next few months when the Saudi production increases.

So in a way one could say that the Iranian response and the bad effects of the (technical difficulty 10:43:10 - 10:43:14) anyways by the increase in the oil price. So I don't think they have many options for doing that.

So of course there is a risk of a race forward to sort of (inaudible) and that's my main concern is that those in the regime that see a conflict with the West or with Israel as good news in terms of preserving the regime which would be a very cynical and absurd approach from my perspective. But nevertheless there might be some in this regime that it could see the

benefits of entering into a more open conflict to sort of bring together the Iranian nations around them when we know that they are not supported by the Iranian people.

So that's where the risk is for them to take that sort of (inaudible) logic of going into something. But it, by no means, can it achieve something meaningful to reverse the policies that we're having at the moment.

Mr. David Ignatius: I'm going to ask a last quick question from me for Ziad and then I want to turn to the audience for your questions, so please be thinking of them.

Ziad, one thing that I hear analysts say is that Iran may be prepared to absorb an Israeli strike, thinking that in the process of doing so it will gain sympathy in the Sunni Arab world that it's lost, and that down the road you could see them pulling allies back together. You also hear people speculate about al-Qaida joining forces with Iran in a sort of broad campaign against the west that seems to be determined

to keep killing Muslims. What about that? Do you see the course of this Arab Spring story being deflected by military action?

Dr. Ziad Asali: Well, the problem with the position we all are facing now is that everybody's acting under U.S. and under pressure of this nuclear option that has to be faced immediately. That prevents a real serious strategic dialogue (technical difficulty 10:45:23 - 10:45:26) the regime in (technical difficulty 10:45:28 - 10:45:30) The problem now, of course, is that people are (technical difficulty 10:45:35 - 10:45:55). And by the way, they are Sunnis, so that deepens the divide that everybody's now talking about this fault line.

I think there is every need to explore the options that are available before actions taken because of the consequences that could, in fact, rebound initially, at least, through the advantage of the Mullahs while, in the long run, I see no (technical difficulty 10:46:26 - 10:46:29) to the kind of (technical difficulty 10:46:31 - 10:46:38) that is very near a (technical difficulty

10:46:40 - 10:46:43).

Mr. David Ignatius: --the audience, I saw, madam, you, and then Charles. And then I'm going to go over here to Anton and to Harlan. So, yes, please.

Ms. Marietje Schaake: Thank you. My name is Marietje Schaake. I'm a member of the European Parliament where I sit on the Iran Delegation among other things. And we talk to Iranians from the government, but also various people in Iran. And I thought that was missing a little bit from this panel. And last week President Obama, at the occasion of the Iranian New Year, reached out directly to the people in Iran in his Nowruz message. And he also spoke about lifting sanctions on software and technology that would enable opening up the world through technology to the Iranian people and perhaps facilitate direct communication with people in the rest of the world.

And I believe this is more than just public or digital diplomacy, and I wanted to ask about your take on the strategic interest of focusing on the human

rights of the Iranian people because they will be fundamental to a new Iran in a sustainable way, with or without the immediate military interests.

Mr. David Ignatius: So--

Ms. Marietje Schaake: Sorry. I--

Mr. David Ignatius: So we should wrap this up because we've got a lot of questions. So the question is human rights in Iran?

Ms. Marietje Schaake: How will it not be a zero sum game against a nuclear issue?

Mr. David Ignatius: Who would like to respond to that? Ziad?

Dr. Ziad Asali: I think this is crucial. I think the whole question of human rights across the Middle East has not opened up seriously. And the opportunities that were presented by the Arab Spring are yet to be explored on this level, and that would include Iran and the Gulf and everywhere else. If people are interested in a serious stability in the Middle East in the future, such issues cannot be dealt with. We will have-

-as was told this afternoon, earlier, we will have change of politicians without change of policy.

Now, what is needed is a new level of interaction where the very concept of democracy is written large across the Middle East. In other terms, it is the consent of the governed, local ways to provide consent of the governed, along with protecting the very basic things; freedom from want, freedom from oppression. If this is not going to be on the agenda for the future of the Middle East, you will have wars. And war manufacturing companies will make more money.

Mr. David Ignatius: Camille, a brief thought.

Mr. Camille Grand: One quick thought. I think we indeed very much need to engage the Iranian people. Two thoughts on this. The crackdown on the Green Revolution was not as nasty as the Assyrian crackdown, but it was not pretty at all. And we should never forget that the Iranian people are the first victims of this regime. And the second thing is that part of that is also from a new perspective. I think there should be, as

President Obama did, messages as well to the Iranian people, so that they understand that they are not part of the problem seen from the Europeans as well.

Mr. David Ignatius: Isaac.

The Hon. Isaac Herzog: Just a short comment to point out that a new network, the webs and so forth, have made a huge influence on the contact between peoples. The big story in Israel where I left today was a webpage by a couple of young architects who made a webpage called, "Iranians, We Love You." And the response from Iran was humongous. And that shows you that way beyond leaders, there is a new development, a new era of connectivity between human beings. However, right now, at this given moment, it does not influence the peak of where the leaders take the decisions.

Mr. David Ignatius: And Nick.

Prof. Nicholas Burns: If negotiations occur, some will say, perhaps on the American side or commenting on the American side, we can't raise human rights because we've got to focus on the nuclear issue. We have to

raise human rights. I completely agree with my colleagues here. We need to keep the pressure on the Iranian regime to, in essence, help to protect the Iranian people.

Mr. David Ignatius: That's an interesting consensus. We have so many questions. I'm going to call on several in sequence, starting with Anton La Guardia and then Harlan Ullman and then Trudy Rubin. Go ahead, Anton, if you can get a microphone, or bellow.

Mr. Anton La Guardia: Well, I'm Anton La Guardia from *The Economist*. Just two points, first the (inaudible) point about Syria, the importance of Syria to Iran. As we wait for this dramatic phase, should we not be doing more about Syria, about, you know, trying to at least end the horrible regimes in place there and indirectly weakening Iran? Secondly, if it comes to military action by Israel, I can't help but sort of have this sort of feeling (inaudible) Israelis started and then hoping the Americans will finish it. I can't help but feel that maybe the U.S. has greater

capabilities to deal (inaudible) program. And, therefore, it just seems, you know, highly risky for the Israelis to do it in a less effective (inaudible).

Mr. David Ignatius: I'm cautioned that no sound goes out if we don't give you a microphone. So we'll make sure that the other questions get microphones. I'm going to go ahead and take two more questions here, and then I'll summarize them for you panelists. But I want to just come back to you, so think about the ones you want to answer. Harlan Ullman.

Mr. Harlan Ullman: I'm Harlan Ullman. My question is to the panel, but also to you, David. Supposing this is not September, October 1962, but July 1914 where things didn't turn out quite as well. If Prime Minister Netanyahu concludes that the threat is really existential and that military force is the only option, even unilaterally, and also realizing that Israeli capability at best can only delay and not prevent, why would Israel not consider using nuclear weapons if the threat was deemed as absolutely existential?

Mr. David Ignatius: That's haunting. Trudy.

Ms. Trudy Rubin: Trudy Rubin, the Philadelphia Inquirer. A couple of things quickly. I'd like to hear a little bit more about what you think the consequences of a strike would be. As you know, Mr. Herzog, there's totally different estimates inside Israel, Meir Dagan, former head of intelligence, saying it would start a regional war that Israel couldn't get out of, whereas Ehud Barak's saying there would only be 500 casualties. So do you think it can be calculated?

And the other question, Nick, I'd like to ask about negotiations. They're supposed to start next month. How is it possible to do step-by-step negotiations without having to lift some sanctions that will lift the pressure on the regime to keep making the moves that would really justify lifting sanctions?

Mr. David Ignatius: So those are some rich questions. Should we be giving Syria primacy, Anton asked. If the Israelis start it, won't the Americans have to finish it, Anton asked. Harlan talked about the

guns of August, so to speak. And Trudy asked about deeper consequences of the strike. Maybe, Isaac, you could start off answering briefly what interests you in that mix.

The Hon. Isaac Herzog: Look, everybody can say whatever he or she believes and feels. I do not know a modern type warfare of this nature in past generations, okay? In past generations, these things were discussed in closed rooms. Even in recent generation, if you read George W.'s book, his memoirs, he mentions an Israeli operation relating to a Syrian nuclear reactor. None of that was ever out in the open, whether it's true or not. So that's why I think this type of scenario that is unraveling in front of our eyes brings all sorts of opinions.

But the truth is, at the end, the leader has to ask himself and the team that works on it, is it feasible? Is it worth it? What's the likelihood of success? And what happens if it fails? And what happens the next day? And are we in line--is there an exit strategy?

These are huge questions that can be discussed for days on end. And, therefore, whatever we say, we don't really know if this will be the outcome of these deliberations and the power game that is unraveling in front of our eyes.

A few things that are clear, at least from an Israeli perspective, don't trust the Supreme Leader Khamenei when he says Iran doesn't want a nuclear weapon, period. Don't trust him. Don't buy this. Of course, everybody wants to be a moderate, and everybody would love to end this. But don't believe it. That's one. Secondly, none of us here know the real answers technically. Thirdly, something that was raised here is unacceptable in any way and in any form, was never an option. I don't know if there is or isn't such capability, and I wouldn't want to delve into it here. But it looks odd and weird.

It's not the right approach. The right approach is whether--since it's an international interest and it's an vital security interest of the United States, as

President Obama said, and a vital security interest of Europe, as was said by European leaders, whether they are willing to take the lead in and action if they have to do it. And, if so, what is the likelihood? And therefore, instead of Israel, as we say it in Hebrew, doing the job, can others do the job if there is no other alternative? That's the simplest question.

Now, something about Syria. Syria is a parallel theater running parallel to the Iranian's scenario. Because of the Iranian scenario, the world's attention is not focused heavily on Syria, including a military option on Syria. I've been a voice in the darkness in Israel, saying that Israel should be more proactive on the Syrian issue, not militarily, but humanitarily and internationally and otherwise because, to take Syria out of the stack of cards of Iran is definitely an interest, definitely a bonus, definitely an advantage in order to weaken the Iranian coalition in the region.

Mr. David Ignatius: Nick, do you have thoughts on any or all of these? Be selective.

Prof. Nicholas Burns: I'd like to speak to Trudy and Harlan's questions.

Mr. David Ignatius: Okay.

Prof. Nicholas Burns: I'll just try to unite them following his last comments. We're in a long term struggle with Iran. And it's the most pernicious government in the Middle East. It's affecting all of our vital interests, so we have to succeed. And I think the most important thing, Harlan, is that the United States and Israel stick together here and that we protect each other and defend each other and have a common strategy.

We may have to use force if diplomacy fails. It's not at all assured of any kind of success. And if we have to use force, I would think the United States should use force because we'll have legitimacy of having exhausted, particularly under President Obama who has great international credibility, the diplomatic

option, if it comes to that. I hope it doesn't. But I would say the United States, if it's that critical, we should be the one taking the action.

On Trudy's question, this is very, very difficult to think through, the diplomacy. You're going to have to stay at the negotiating table long enough to seriously and credibly test, is there a bottom line Iranian capacity to make a deal short of a nuclear weapon? But we can't stay too long or (technical difficulty). It uses the negotiations to engage in its secret enrichment research, or whatever they're doing with ballistic missiles, to race ahead and to present us with a *fait accompli* at the end of negotiations.

So that's going to be a key when to call a halt to negotiations or when to judge that they haven't worked. It's going to be a key judgment. But I think that that doesn't argue against diplomacy. I think it argues for it, at least providing this window, taking advantage of it.

In the Bush administration, the P5 countries offered Iran that we would open negotiations in June, July of 2006--this was a public offer. We would suspend the U.N. Security Council sanctions. Iran would suspend enrichment. This was Russia, China, Britain, France, Germany, the United States. Iran turned us down. Solana made the same offer the next year in 2007. Iran turned us down. We're not dealing with easy people here. So we have to test them. But if they can't work with us diplomatically, I think they force the United States and other countries down that other road.

Mr. David Ignatius: Camille.

Mr. Camille Grand: Very quickly, on the military option, if we look back at precedence, two things. On the consequences, regional consequences, you think of (inaudible) reactor facility bombed by whomever in Syria. Interestingly, not even an Arab League communicated afterwards. Too many people were happy with that. So think about that.

The second thing is, of course this is very (technical difficulty 11:00:24 - 11:00:31) but the key (technical difficulty) whether if you expect (technical difficulty) for all of Iraq, which are now valuable, the delays expected were one to five years. So that's a very different way of doing things. And in the U.S. debates, when people said the Israelis cannot do it our way, that is true. But they might have a different (inaudible).

Having said all of this, I would certainly prefer that we go for an operation that would not be Israeli led or Israeli prompted. I think it would be much better for everyone else and probably not the U.S. alone as well. But, again, give chance to negotiations.

Mr. David Ignatius: Ziad.

Dr. Ziad Asali: Well, it's really hard to tell. And I agree that people who make decisions have access to information that I simply cannot have access to and they have to struggle with this. In short, I think the Mullahs are going to have it in that back of their mind

that India and Pakistan got away with an international consensus about their nuclear program. And eventually they were incorporated into the international community and India became a strategic friend of the United States.

They have to consider whether that option applies to them also and they have to think of the Iraq option or the Libyan option, where if when Gadaffi was to have said that he was finished, because he gave up on his nuclear option. There has to be a credible way to convince the Iranian leadership that they will have very serious consequences and it has to be credible. Otherwise, there will have to be serious consequences.

Mr. David Ignatius: Data point and then I'm going to go to people on this side and then I'm going to go to people on that side. The data point is that I once asked the former head of the Iraqi nuclear program, a man named Jaffer Jaffer, what effect the (inaudible) strike had had. And he said, well, that's when we finally got serious about our nuclear program.

So Charles Grant and then these two gentlemen here on the end and then Congressman Hastings.

Mr. Charles Grant: I have an observation and a question based on a recent trip to Russia. Most people in the Russian strategic community that I've met said they think a U.S. attack on Iran is almost certain before the U.S. presidential election. They really hope it happens. They all want it to happen. They think this will greatly weaken U.S. power in the Middle East and they think it'll push the price of oil up enormously.

Now, of course, between Obama and Medvedev, there was a kind of reset for the last two year. Part of that was helped when Iran on the UNSC and the blocking of the sail of the S-300 interceptors to Iran (technical difficulty) to continue. Does that matter? My question is for Mr. Herzog. Israel has a kind of special relationship with Russia. Can you get Russia to help at all or is Russia irrelevant in this equation?

Mr. David Ignatius: Yes. If you can bring the microphone down here, please. Yes.

Unidentified Audience Member: (Unintelligible)
University of Torino Italy. There is a concentration of nuclear powers near Iran, India, Pakistan, Russia and unofficially Israel. Do you think this is relevant to the whole issue? Let me also remind you of an Egyptian amendment to a document by the Vienna Agency putting forth the possibility of an area of denuclearization in the Middle East. And if I remember correctly, because it was necessary in order to get the whole issue to the Security Council, this amendment was even voted, I believe, by the Bush Administration. But Nick Burns can perhaps correct me if I'm mistaken.

Mr. David Ignatius: Good. Sir.

Mr. Marcus Frietas: Marcus Freitsas. My question is how would you rate, Ambassador Burns, the role that China and Russia have played in this? And have they been active enough and have they been engaging enough? And if you were to think about day after, as you just mentioned, what do you see? Do you see a North Korean

solution of engagement or do you see a Pakistani way of doing it?

Mr. David Ignatius: Good question. Congressman Hastings.

Rep. Alcee Hastings: Mr. Herzog, two years ago I was at (inaudible) home and he described to me the ring of fire and I have spent a lot of time on potential consequences, but it does not only affect the Middle East. And I guess if I have a question at all, is among the things that are likely consequences are to activate cells in the United States and Europe and elsewhere in the world. That's number one.

Number two, I don't think that there are many of us in this room that are nuclear scientists. When I went on the House intelligence committee of the United States House of Representatives 11 years ago, the projection then was that Iran would have a bomb in 2012. Last time I looked, this is 2012. And I think if we keep talking or I've had the misfortune (technical difficulty) or they set off their bomb with them

telling it was for peaceful enrichment, followed shortly by visiting Pakistan and then saying the same thing.

Look, Iran is lying and anybody that studies what the IAEA has said already knows that they're about the business of getting the bomb. It's a question of what do we do about it in the long haul.

Mr. David Ignatius: So those are four forceful questions (technical difficulty) Isaac, too, to Nick. So why don't we turn to the two of you and get your responses. Nick?

Prof. Nicholas Burns: Are they lying? I agree completely with Congressman Hastings on this. The Iranians are intent on building a nuclear weapons capacity. There's no doubt about it in my mind so I agree with him. I want to address the questions on China and Russia. I see them in quite different ways. And I negotiated the first three Security Council sanctions resolutions. I know the six, seven and eight with those two governments with others of my American

colleagues. The Russians have a real clear understanding of who the Iranians are. They're closer geographically. They have a longer term history with the Iranians. I think they have a much more highly developed strategic and a very sophisticated view of this question.

My sense is the Russians can be part of the answer here. They can be very helpful to President Obama, Prime Minister Cameron, President Sarkozy and others with some skillful diplomacy. A reset 2.0 is highly desirable. No matter what our differences are, we got many with President Putin. We need him on this issue. And a tough-minded Russia behind the sanctions regime and using political influence in Iran it can help.

The Chinese have been a major hindrance because when we all in '05 and '06 the Europeans reduced their economic exposure 22 billion euros and export credits in 2005 cut (technical difficulty) by 2007 the Chinese rushed in and filled all those contracts. The Chinese are the largest trade partner. They have fundamentally

undercut the sanctions regime. They've given no help on the political side and in negotiations. It's China Inc. and China's mercantilist interests that come first. And so I think our pressure ought to be on China to get in line with the Europeans, the United States and Russia to help us figure this out.

And I'll go back to a point I made before, I'm convinced that if sanctions fail and certainly if negotiations fail we're gonna be left with one alternative. We've already heard from President Obama; he is going to take a very tough-minded approach to deny Iran a nuclear weapons future. So maybe his speeches were aimed at China as well as at the Iranians. I think China's the big drag right now.

The Hon. Isaac Herzog: First all, the issue of Russia. Russia is an important element in our region. Definitely Israel has a unique relationship with Russia. And I must say that I do feel a lot of growing Russian interest, Russian leadership interest in the Israeli position as opposed to the initial position of

Russia, which was not in line with Israeli or American position. I do feel that they are such (technical difficulty) on all fronts.

But let's go back a second to the power game that there is. In the last year we've seen a new division in world affairs or something that's more coherent. You see a U.S./Europe block versus Russia and China on three major issues: it was Libya, its Syria and its Iran. And the question is, is it something that will stay for a long time? Is it for sure now that Russia and China will be together opposing all of the proposals and the security council of the United States and Europe versus Iran versus Syria and so forth? So one assumption was that the Russian position depends until the outcome of the elections and the (technical difficulty) over that. And there were hints in recent weeks, both on the Russian front and on the Chinese front, that on either of the topics, Syria or Iran, they would be more accommodating.

Frankly, from the outside it's looks at odds to us

that when they know that a Muslim fundamentalist country is moving towards a nuclear capability which can have clear (inaudible) effect on their internal politics because of the strong Muslim presence in both of those countries.

Why aren't they awakening earlier? And the answer we're getting from Chinese and Russians is, "You're wrong. We are against this program but we believe in negotiations. We believe that time will do its effect, that there will be a different outcome," and so forth and so on. They do not really disseminate the threat or they feel that they can somehow commercially or otherwise leverage on Iran not to be an adversary or a threat to China and Russia. So it's an enigma. It's clear enigma. And all our deliberations with visiting Russian and Chinese dignitaries and interfacing with them all over the world frontier hasn't given us the answer. Why aren't they in line with United States and Europe? Perhaps because they're fearful that it will enhance the hegemony of the United States and Europe in

world affairs again or something like that.

Mr. David Ignatius: Let me just ask you briefly, Isaac, to comment on the question from the professor from Turan and to focus that on just a quick response, would Israel ever consider proposals that lead to denuclearization in the Middle East?

The Hon. Isaac Herzog: The last comment that was ever held about this topic was by then Prime Minister Shimon Peres in 1996 when he spoke of a denuclearized Middle East and hinted of various options. One of the major risks of an Iranian nuclear program is a clear arms race and nuclear arms race with Turkey and Egypt and other countries joining in. So it looks a bit far away to discuss it at this stage.

Netanyahu hinted in a recent meeting with political leaders, not on the nuclear issue but on something else, he said when there were missile launchings from Gaza on Israel last week, "It all starts with Iran. If Iran will change the region will change." And I can add to it myself clearly it all starts with Iran if there

will be a strategic change on the Iranian frontier perhaps then new horizon and vistas will open up in the region, as well, in other issues.

Mr. David Ignatius: Camille had a brief comment then I want to go to people on this side of the room. Camille?

Mr. Camille Grand: Just two footnotes on this issue of a Middle East weapons of mass destruction free zone, which has been in the diplomatic game even though it's a very long-term prospect it's interesting to note that every year Israel votes in favor of the resolution in the U.N. on this and has a principle position to say that it is negotiable.

The second thing is on Russia and China, the important thing also I agree with Nick that China is playing the complicated game in terms of on the sanctions. On the other end Russia delivers China because we've never seen the Chinese vote alone against a round of sanctions.

Mr. David Ignatius: I would just also note Russia

may deliver China but so also may Saudi Arabia. I think pressure from the Gulf Arab states on China is having some tiny effect. Laura Blumenfeld first in the first row and then, Madam, you in the second row and then further back there was somebody, the two--yes, yes, we'll go to you, take those three.

Ms. Laura Blumenfeld: Hi, Laura Blumenfeld, from the German Marshall Fund. My question is about the presidential election in the United States. I'm wondering how it's influencing the crisis, possibly distorting it and also specifically the likely outcome and thinking for both President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu. How is that working into their thinking?

Mr. David Ignatius: Second row, please.

Ms. Niki Tzavela: My name is Niki Tzavela. I'm a member of the European Parliament. For those of us that we talk to Iranian officials, we see that there has been a tremendous change in the arrogance they used to have after the sanctions and after whatever happened

within the Arab Spring. So my opinion is because we talk to them, not through my country, Greece, because Nick knows we have relations with Iran for 4,000 years now.

My opinion is--and by the way, I have to tell you because you ask, do you trust them, in international business, when a contract is completely unreliable, we call it the Iranian Contract. So this means that diplomacy has a long way to go. But they sign contracts. Finally, they sign contracts and they may keep them.

Now, my opinion is, because I have seen the change, they are very skeptical (inaudible) they are as afraid as you are. Last week, they told me if there is a war, it will be a war by a mistake. So you tell them there is never a war by a mistake. Anyway, you have a long way to go but diplomacy's still there.

My question is the following. What is the role of the United Arab Emirates in this conflict? Because if you are afraid, they're more afraid than you and these

are your neighbors. Do you have any collaboration with them? Do you rely on them as much as you rely on the Americans?

Mr. David Ignatius: If you could pass the microphone back to the--yes, to the fourth row, our Israeli friend.

Mr. Oded Eran: David, there is an answer to your question about whether Israel will agree or not to proliferation (inaudible) and it was submitted to the U.N. and we negotiated with the agreement with the EU and the Barcelona process. There is a vision that says when all the political circumstances will exist, then we will join this effort.

But this is a question to my good friend (inaudible) I fully agree with Nick Burns when he says that we need to exhaust of the diplomatic and the negotiations, notwithstanding the supreme leader never met--the most Western leader that they met was Prime Minister Erdoğan from Turkey. And so notwithstanding this, I fully support your proposal.

And the question to Mr. Herzog is the following. Let's say that a back channel was created and the United States negotiated a deal which is not exactly this very position. Let's say that the deal is 20 percent enrichment. Where is supervision by the IAA and all the (technical difficulty) preconditions (technical difficulty) in the Israeli government. Do you go for this or you reject it?

Mr. David Ignatius: Great question. Panel, do you-- Isaac, do you want to start with that? 'Cause that's very much of the moment. There are a lot of options that might be on the table that would allow Iran the same rights as any other NPT signatory has to enrich uranium. Would Israel accept them?

The Hon. Isaac Herzog: I think that Israel's decision--first of all, although Iran is not only good friend but is a very well-known Israeli diplomat for all those who don't know who he is. So he's got a lot to say on many issues, on this issue, as well.

But I think Israel's position will be determined

first and foremost in conjunction with the U.S. position. Whether the U.S. feels it's a real deal or not. It won't be able, Israel, in my mind, simply to say we beg totally to differ if they feel, in the intimacy, that there is, between the intelligence agencies and the defense establishments. And the administrations of both nations to exchange rules and believe that it is a real deal.

I want to make it clear, again, I think that the Israeli leadership and the Israeli public would definitely accept the availability of an agreement between the international leadership and Iran. But the question--the devil is always in the details. And the fear was always, in Israel, and I think the fear is always in the P5 plus 1, is that the Iranian enrichment process is a procrastinating process and a very smart maneuvering process to explain to you the following.

If they need now to enrich in order to reach the capability of a bomb, there is a certain time span that allows a long time for action. But if they enrich

slowly and slowly in a widespread type process, all of a sudden, by covert decision, they can, in a speedy way, get to the nuclear capability. And that will be, of course, the real test. Where are the caveats that can stop it physically and make sure that it doesn't happen? This will be the question.

Now, just a comment about the U.S. elections. The U.S., seriously speaking, has no bearing on this decision making in Israel. No bearing. There is another process in Israel whether Netanyahu would want to go to elections from this September to next March. I feel, yes. I feel there's a possibility. It has not necessarily to do with the topic in this forum.

Mr. David Ignatius: Nick.

Prof. Nicholas Burns: I would just say, on the U.S. election, you know, it's always hard to predict when we can bipartisan and when we're not. But if there's ever a moment when the American political leadership should try to stand together, it's right now in Iran. I mean, I certainly, when I worked for President Bush,

appreciated the support we had from a lot of democratic senators. Senator Obama, Senator Clinton, Senator Biden. And I really hope we get that now. One united message to the Iranian because this is a vital interest. We're talking about the possibility of a war if diplomacy doesn't succeed, and so I think every American would hope for that.

It's interesting to look at the campaign positions of all the Republicans who have run for president, going back to the early debates, with the exception, I believe, of Senator Santorum. There's a high degree of--and Representative Paul, for different reasons. There's a high degree of integration among those policies. For instance, I think that, as I understand Governor Romney's position, quite similar to President Obama's. In the heat of the campaign, of course, they're charging President Obama with not being tough enough. But if you look at the positions, they're quite similar.

On Oded's question, and I want to second my great

respect for Oded, great Israeli diplomat, this is where diplomacy gets very, very tough. If you do get into talks and they actually succeed in going forward a couple of weeks and you start talking about proposals, we're going to have to remember President Regan's maxim trust but verify. And the key decisions that the P5 side, the European-China-Russia-America side will have to make is, do we allow them a degree of civil nuclear power? No nuclear weapons, obviously, but civil nuclear power and under what conditions.

The proposal that we made in 2006-7, we, P5 plus 1, was that Russia or France would enrich the uranium. They would send the nuclear fuel to Iranian reactors and take back the spent fuel. We would have custody of the chain. I sure think that's a better way to go than leaving the Iranians to have the right to do it and hope that the Iranians will abide by closely-monitored IAEA inspections.

They've been lying and cheating and not telling the truth. Don't trust me on this, just read the IAEA

reports, as Congressman Hastings said. So I think we've got to strike a very tough deal here if we're going to be successful, along the hypothetical lines that you wanted us to discuss.

Mr. David Ignatius: That proposal for enriching outside Iran is still on the table from Turkey. Camille.

Mr. Camille Grand: On this issue, I think one thing we need to bear in mind is there is no such thing as a right to enrichment. There is a right to peaceful uses. And of course is Iran is in full compliance with its NPT obligation, has not been found to have undercover activities, in the long term, it might need an enrichment facility when it (inaudible) nuclear program is expended under international safeguards. But we're talking about very long term and it's up to the Iranians to reestablish trust with the international community and to demonstrate that their current activities are--and therefore, the sense of the freeze on the enrichment activities.

And honestly, when you look at current nuclear activities, it makes no sense to enrich six tons of light and rich uranium for research purposes. This is not what you call research. And the same is currently applying to the 20 percent threshold that they are very quickly trying to cross and to go up to with as much stock of 20 percent enriched uranium as possible.

Just one nasty comment about U.S. election. I hope it doesn't alter the intelligence assessment of the-- because I have sometimes the feeling that the sense of the calendar is sometimes connected with the electoral conduit. But I agree that what matters is the actual bipartisan support for the policy at the moment.

Mr. David Ignatius: Tell us, what about the UAE, Ziad?

Dr. Ziad Asali: Can I just say one thing about the elections? I think there will be no problem with the consensus that Nick wants if the president goes to war. But I'm not sure that there will be such a consensus if he does not. And it may be used in the elections. I

would not put it past the politics of the moment for this to become an issue if it is not resolved before the elections.

Mr. David Ignatius: A pretty war-weary country, though, you'd have to say, looking at America.

Dr. Ziad Asali: It is true.

Mr. David Ignatius: So I'm going to do--and do you want to say a couple words about the UAE? Yes.

Dr. Ziad Asali: Well, clearly, I can tell you that the Emirates is not interested in the Iranians getting any nuclear weapons of any kind and considers it truly an existential threat, and a threat to its way of life and even empowerment within the country. They are very happy with the commitment that the president made publicly that he will not allow it to happen. And if the last measure would be a physical one, they would not be opposed to it.

Mr. David Ignatius: Camille, did you--

Mr. Camille Grand: Under the U.S. control, one point maybe when we talk about the UAE, there might be

slight differences between Abu Dhabi and Dubai. 'Cause Dubai's doing a lot of trade with Iran, including not real illicit trade, when Abu Dhabi's very concerned about the security aspect of the debate.

Mr. David Ignatius: If we get down to bargaining between Abu Dhabi and Dubai, I'll think we've done well. So I'm going to turn to people who've been patient and also who are very good at waving pieces of paper in the back row. Starting with you and then the gentleman all the way--yes, I see that piece of paper. You and then there's a gentleman here in the second row and, yes, you sir, you had your hand up early. So, yes, please, madam.

Nora Fisher Onar: Nora Fisher Onar, I'm a Ron Asmus policy fellow and from Istanbul. And my question--and you've already alluded to it, I think. Your answers have gone around it. But there is a bit of an elephant in the room, or it's not an elephant, maybe a baby hippopotamus, and that is Turkey. You've talked about a lot of possible interlocutors, but if there is one

actor that does have at least access to the black box of the Iranian leadership, even though Turkey's now squarely back in the western camp and its interests are very much aligned with those of Israel, vis-à-vis, perception towards Iran. Is this being explored at all, can Turkey play a role as the (inaudible).

Mr. David Ignatius: Good. Turkey. I think that's a good question. The Turkish elephant, as it were. Sir.

Mr. Pervez Hoodboy: Pervez Hoodboy from Pakistan.

Mr. David Ignatius: Here at GMF it does.

Mr. Pervez Hoodboy: Pervez Hoodboy from Pakistan. Strongly opposed to nuclear weapons. Both of my country, Iran and Israel. I see that Brussels Forum has chosen a panel that's gung-ho on war against Iran, so I want to ask them a question. Given how often the United States and Israel have been isolated in the General Assembly and the frequency with which the U.S. has had to cast its veto, particularly on the issue of settlements, how do you think the rest of the world is going to respond given, also, that your country went to

war against Iraq for reason that were less than genuine?

Mr. David Ignatius: Good, tough question. Sir, in the second row. Yes, you.

Mr. Konstantin von Eggert: Konstantin von Eggert from Moscow. It's not so much a question but rather an observation, especially with regard to what Mr. Herzog was saying. We Russians keep hearing at international conferences that there's this mystery about the Russian position. There is no mystery in it. The mystery is concealed in two words; regime change. Russian position has nothing to do with, you know, fearing or not fearing Muslim fundamentalism and even not so much with the, you know, the deals that are concluded. Compared to the GDP, that's nothing. That's zero. It's a principled position by Mr. Putin that he and his team will never allow anyone to decide who is going to run which country, even if it is the United Nations Security Council. They feel duped over Libya and I think that that is the reason for a stand on Iran and

on Syria. And--

Mr. David Ignatius: We're going to--I'm going to-- with your--apologies. We're at the end and I want to leave some time for people to answer the questions. And a good set--last question from Jim Kolbe.

Mr. Jim Kolbe: Well, thank you very much. My question was something that hasn't even been hinted at or touched on here today, and that is the recent fatwa from the Ayatollah, from the Supreme Leader against the building of any nuclear weapon. I listened the other day to a discussion in front of a very important policy maker here in the United States by an Iran expert, Iranian himself, no friend of the regime, who said this is religiously, legally binding on every elected official or every official in Iran, and it can't be changed except by the death of the Ayatollah or if they were to go to war itself. I'm wondering, is this just a sham? Is it totally false? We certainly thought (unintelligible) had something to do with it. And if it's not, is it being factored in? And who, by the way,

are we going to be negotiating with, the president or representatives of the Supreme Leader?

Mr. David Ignatius: Good. So let us conclude and brief comments because we are at the bottom of the hour, starting with Isaac.

The Hon. Isaac Herzog: I will summarize by saying to all those who raise queries as to the legitimacy of the case, including our friend from Pakistan, nobody's gung ho on war, and nobody wants war. And there is a major fear of war. But, unfortunately, we live in a region where these things culminate at times to use of force because somebody out there comes forward with the following three elements: one, clear declaration as to the need to annihilate my country, two, investing billions of dollars in a nuclear program saying, of course, we want to be an empire, three, depending on a school of thought of Islam, which is the most extreme of it all, which doesn't accommodate, really, any other religion, and, four, building a missile capability that reaches London, Paris and Berlin. And all of this

together is a clear sign to somebody who has responsibility to take action.

Now, if possible in the international circumstances of today, to stop it by international means, this is the preferred alternative of everybody, including the Israeli leadership. But if not, we ought to know that there has to have also a possibility of a military option, preferably, again, lead by the international community which understands the risks entailed in an Iranian nuclear program for the future of world peace.

Mr. David Ignatius: Nick, and perhaps you'd want to reference the gentleman's comment specifically about your remarks about Russia.

Prof. Nicholas Burns: Fine. I just want to say a word about Turkey. I know there was a bad experience two years ago between Turkey and the United States over this issue. But Prime Minister Erdogan is a truly gifted leader. His stock is ascending, appreciating in the Middle East. You have to think about a negotiation. Who's going to actually pull the deal together? It may

require a mediator between the P5 sitting here and Iran. Turkey, in my mind, is the most likely mediator because of the trust on both sides. We have great trust in Erdogan and the Turkish government, very skilled government, very skilled Foreign Minister. So that might be the likely place to go.

India's another possibility. Although India, unfortunately, has taken this very disappointing decision not to actively reduce its oil imports. We've seen South Korea, Japan, and China reduce their Iranian energy imports in the month of February. And India's not, so I think India's less likely.

I would just say, on Congressman Kolbe's very good question, I wish that we could trust the word of the Supreme Leader. But if you look at the last 30 years of U.S.-Iranian relations, they have violated our trust countless times. And I guess I would say they've given us no reason to trust their public statements. And I'm not an expert on Iranian politics. I would defer to the people you mentioned, as to what this means. But my

sense is that he has the power, not President Ahmadinejad, who's being sidelined right now.

And all I see are some of the events that Congressman Hastings and others have pointed to, and the IA report just, you know, puts out in public they're going forward on enrichment, they're racing forward, they're going forward on ballistic missiles. They're giving us every reason to believe that they're racing towards a nuclear capacity, so I can't believe the Iranian government's statements or the fatwa.

Mr. David Ignatius: Camille, closing thoughts?

Mr. Camille Grand: Closing thoughts, one issue on Turkey. Turkey has--there was this issue with the Brazilian-Turkish proposal a couple of years ago that was not, I think, helpful. But, now, Turkey has played a very important role, has been hosting a round of talks. This is likely to happen again. And, certainly, Turkey, I think, can play their useful role in that process. I think it is also a responsibility of the P5, plus one, to be more explicit with--beyond themselves

on what are the issues on the table because sometimes there is really an issue of going into the details with some friends and partners on this issue.

One just quick comment on regime change. I think it is no longer in the cards. And Nick played an incremental role in sidelining that part of the Bush administration rhetoric in the early days of--during Bush's first term. I really believe that it's not the Iranian policy of any of the countries engaged in that process. Even, at times, at the expenses of human rights, as you were discussing earlier, but I think we've--there's now clear emphasis on that and the fact that the nuclear fight is absolutely absolute priority and that we can live with it, and that the regime issue is an issue for the Iranian people.

Mr. David Ignatius: We'll have to wait for Nick's memoirs to know just how headed off war. But a final comment, Ziad.

Dr. Ziad Asali: I just want to take issue with the fact that this panel is gung ho on the war, and I think

that that is clearly not the case. The problem with the timing of this whole issue is that it is stopping a serious dialogue, conversation, negotiations about the larger issues of the Middle East, just exactly at the time when these issues are opened by the Arab uprisings.

I think there has to be a deal for war to be avoided. There has to be a deal that essentially buys us all time, like the exchanging the sanctions for the cessation of enrichment. For instance, verifiable, documented, et cetera, that saves us from that incredible pressure and the destruction and the consequences and the big unknown and the black swans and all these things. But it should also be part of the opening of a serious approach to the Middle East.

The Middle East cannot continue being the kind of disaster that it is without answering the right questions. The issue of nuclear proliferation would have to be on the table. Mubarak was also very active in pushing for that, as well as the new arrangements

for people to have societies that are stable and sustainable.

Mr. David Ignatius: So I go to a lot of panel discussions on this subject. I must say I thought that our panelists were really interesting and forthright. So, please, join me in thanking them. And I'll turn it back to our supreme leader.

Mr. Craig Kennedy: Thank you.