

JOINT EXPERTS' STATEMENT ON IRAN

Among the many challenges that will greet President-elect Obama when he takes office, there are few, if any, more urgent and complex than the question of Iran. There are also few issues more clouded by myths and misconceptions. In this Joint Experts' Statement on Iran, a group of top scholars, experts and diplomats - with years of experience studying and dealing with Iran - have come together to clear away some of the myths that have driven the failed policies of the past and to outline a factually-grounded, five-step strategy for dealing successfully with Iran in the future.

Despite recent glimmers of diplomacy, the United States and Iran remain locked in a cycle of threats and defiance that destabilizes the Middle East and weakens U.S. national security.

Today, Iran and the United States are unable to coordinate campaigns against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, their common enemies. Iran is either withholding help or acting to thwart U.S. interests in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Gaza. Within Iran, a looming sense of external threat has empowered hard-liners and given them both motive and pretext to curb civil liberties and further restrict democracy. On the nuclear front, Iran continues to enrich uranium in spite of binding U.N. resolutions, backed by economic sanctions, calling for it to suspend enrichment.

U.S. efforts to manage Iran through isolation, threats and sanctions have been tried intermittently for more than two decades. In that time they have not solved any major problem in U.S.-Iran relations, and have made most of them worse. Faced with the manifest failure of past efforts to isolate or economically coerce Iran, some now advocate escalation of sanctions or even military attack. But dispassionate analysis shows that an attack would almost

certainly backfire, wasting lives, fomenting extremism and damaging the long-term security interests of both the U.S. and Israel. And long experience has shown that prospects for successfully coercing Iran through achievable economic sanctions are remote at best.

Fortunately, we are not forced to choose between a coercive strategy that has clearly failed and a military option that has very little chance of success.

There is another way, one far more likely to succeed: Open the door to direct, unconditional and comprehensive negotiations at the senior diplomatic level where personal contacts can be developed, intentions tested, and possibilities explored on both sides. Adopt policies to facilitate unofficial contacts between scholars, professionals, religious leaders, lawmakers and ordinary citizens. Paradoxical as it may seem amid all the heated media rhetoric, sustained engagement is far more likely to strengthen United States national security at this stage than either escalation to war or continued efforts to threaten, intimidate or coerce Iran.

Enclosed are five key steps the United States should take to implement an effective diplomatic strategy with Iran.

THE EXPERTS

Ambassador Thomas Pickering
Co-chair
Vice-Chairman, Hills & Co.; Fmr. U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Russia, Israel

Ambassador James F. Dobbins
Co-chair
Fmr. Special Envoy for Afghanistan; Rep. to the Afghan opposition after Sept. 11, 2001

Gary G. Sick
Co-chair
Snr. Research Scholar, Columbia Univ. SIPA's Middle East Inst.

Ali Banuazizi
Prof. of Political Science & Dir.: Islamic Civilization & Societies Program, Boston College

Mehrzad Boroujerdi
Assoc. Prof. of Political Science; Founding Dir., Middle Eastern Studies Program; Syracuse Univ.

Juan R.I. Cole
Richard P. Mitchell Collegiate Prof. of History, Univ. of Michigan

Rola el-Husseini
Asst. Professor, Bush School of Government, Texas A&M Univ.

Farideh Farhi
Ind. Researcher and Affiliate Graduate Faculty, Univ. of Hawai'i-Manoa

Geoffrey E. Forden
Research Assoc., Program on Science, Tech. & Society, MIT

Hadi Ghaemi
Coordinator, Int'l. Campaign for Human Rights in Iran

Philip Giraldi
Fmr. Counter-terrorism Specialist, CIA

Farhad Kazemi
Prof. of Politics and Middle Eastern Studies, NYU

Stephen Kinzer
Author & Award-winning Foreign Correspondent

Ambassador William G. Miller
Snr. Fellow, Woodrow Wilson Int'l. Center for Scholars

Emile A. Nakhleh
Fmr. Director, Political Islam Strategic Analysis Program, CIA

Augustus Richard Norton
Prof. of Int'l Relations & Anthropology, Boston Univ.

Trita Parsi
Award-winning Author; Pres., National Iranian American Council

Barnett R. Rubin
Dir. of Studies & Senior Fellow, Center on Int'l Cooperation, NYU; Fmr. Special Advisor to the UN SRSG for Afghanistan

John Tirman
Exec. Director, Center for Int'l Studies, MIT

James Walsh
Research Associate, MIT

Five Key Steps the United States Should Take to Implement an Effective Diplomatic Strategy with Iran

Project Conveners

Dr. Richard Parker
Project Director
Executive Director, American
Foreign Policy Project
Professor, University of Connecticut
Law School

Sanam Anderlini
Co-founder, International Civil
Society Action Network
Research Affiliate, MIT Center for
International Studies

Project Partners

3D Security Initiative
American Foreign Policy Project
International Civil Society Action
Network
Just Foreign Policy
National Iranian American Council

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Disclaimer

This statement is the product of a large group of experts with diverse knowledge, experience and affiliations. While all members strongly support the general policy thrust and judgments reflected in this statement, they may not necessarily all concur with every specific assertion or recommendation contained therein.

1. Replace calls for regime change with a long-term strategy:

Threats are not cowing Iran and the current regime in Tehran is not in imminent peril. But few leaders will negotiate in good faith with a government they think is trying to subvert them, and that perception may well be the single greatest barrier under U.S. control to meaningful dialogue with Iran. The United States needs to stop the provocations and take a long-term view with this regime, as it did with the Soviet Union and China. We might begin by facilitating broad-ranging people-to-people contacts, opening a U.S. interest section in Tehran, and promoting cultural exchanges.

2. Support human rights through effective, international means:

While the United States is rightly concerned with Iran's worsening record of human rights violations, the best way to address that concern is through supporting recognized international efforts. Iranian human rights and democracy advocates confirm that American political interference masquerading as "democracy promotion" is harming, not helping, the cause of democracy in Iran.

3. Allow Iran a place at the table – alongside other key states – in shaping the future of Iraq, Afghanistan and the region:

This was the recommendation of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group with regard to Iraq. It may be counter-intuitive in today's political climate – but it is sound policy. Iran has a long-term interest in the stability of its neighbors. Moreover, the United States and Iran support the same government in Iraq and face common enemies (the Taliban and al-Qaeda) in Afghanistan. Iran has shown it can be a valuable ally when included as a partner, and a troublesome thorn when not. Offering Iran a place at the table cannot assure cooperation, but it will greatly increase the likelihood of cooperation by giving Iran something it highly values that it can lose by non-cooperation. The United States might start by appointing a special envoy with broad authority to deal comprehensively and constructively with Iran (as opposed to trading accusations) and explore its willingness to work with the United States on issues of common concern.

4. Address the nuclear issue within the context of a broader U.S. - Iran opening:

Nothing is gained by imposing

peremptory preconditions on dialogue. The United States should take an active leadership role in ongoing multilateral talks to resolve the nuclear impasse in the context of wide-ranging dialogue with Iran. Negotiators should give the nuclear talks a reasonable deadline, and retain the threat of tougher sanctions if negotiations fail. They should also, however, offer the credible prospect of security assurances and specific, tangible benefits such as the easing of U.S. sanctions in response to positive policy shifts in Iran. Active U.S. involvement may not cure all, but it certainly will change the equation, particularly if it is part of a broader opening.

5. Re-energize the Arab-Israeli peace process and act as an honest broker in that process:

Israel's security lies in making peace with its neighbors. Any U.S. moves towards mediating the Arab-Israeli crisis in a balanced way would ease tensions in the region, and would be positively received as a step forward for peace. As a practical matter, however, experience has shown that any long-term solution to Israel's problems with the Palestinians and Lebanon probably will require dealing, directly or indirectly, with Hamas and Hezbollah. Iran supports these organizations, and thus has influence with them. If properly managed, a U.S. rapprochement with Iran, even an opening of talks, could help in dealing with Arab-Israeli issues, benefiting Israel as well as its neighbors.

Long-standing diplomatic practice makes clear that talking directly to a foreign government in no way signals approval of the government, its policies or its actions. Indeed, there are numerous instances in our history when clear-eyed U.S. diplomacy with regimes we deemed objectionable – e.g., Soviet Union, China, North Korea, Libya and Iran itself (cooperating in Afghanistan to topple the Taliban after 9/11) – produced positive results in difficult situations.

After many years of mutual hostility, no one should expect that engaging Iran will be easy. It may prove impossible. But past policies have not worked, and what has been largely missing from U.S. policy for most of the past three decades is a sustained commitment to real diplomacy with Iran. The time has come to see what true diplomacy can accomplish.

Basic Misconceptions about Iran

U.S. policies towards Iran have failed to achieve their objectives. A key reason for their failure is that they are rooted in fundamental misconceptions about Iran. This annex addresses eight key misconceptions that have driven U.S. policy in the wrong direction.

Myth # 1. President Ahmadinejad calls the shots on nuclear and foreign policy...

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has grabbed the world's attention with his inflammatory and sometimes offensive statements. But he does not call the shots on Iran's nuclear and foreign policy. The ultimate decision-maker is Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the commander-in-chief of Iran's forces. Despite his frequently hostile rhetoric aimed at Israel and the West, Khamenei's track record reveals a cautious decision-maker who acts after consulting advisors holding a range of views, including views sharply critical of Ahmadinejad. That said, it is clear that U.S. policies and rhetoric have bolstered hard-liners in Iran, just as Ahmadinejad's confrontational rhetoric has bolstered hard-liners here.

Myth # 2. The political system of the Islamic Republic is frail and ripe for regime change.

In fact, there is currently no significant support within Iran for extra-constitutional regime change. Yes, there is popular dissatisfaction, but Iranians also recall the aftermath of their own revolution in 1979: lawlessness, mass executions, and the emigration of over half a million people, followed by a costly war. They have seen the outcome of U.S.-sponsored regime change in Afghanistan and in Iraq. They want no part of it.

Myth # 3. The Iranian leadership's religious beliefs render them undeterrable.

The recent history of Iran makes crystal clear that national self-preservation and regional influence – not some quest for martyrdom in the service of Islam – is Iran's main foreign policy goal. For example:

- In the 1990s, Iran chose a closer relationship with Russia over support for rebellious Chechen Muslims.
- Iran actively supported and helped to finance the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.
- Iran has ceased its efforts to export the Islamic revolution to other Persian Gulf states, in favor of developing good relations with the governments of those states.
- During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran took the pragmatic step of developing secret ties and trading arms with Israel, even as Iran and Israel denounced each other in public.

Myth # 4. Iran's current leadership is implacably opposed to the United States.

Iran will not accept preconditions for dialogue with the United States, any more than the United States would accept preconditions for talking to Iran. But Iran is clearly open to broad-ranging dialogue with the United States. In fact, it has made multiple peace overtures that the United States has rebuffed. Right after 9/11, Iran worked with the United States to get rid of the Taliban in Afghanistan, including paying for the Afghan troops serving under U.S. command. Iran helped establish the U.S.-backed government and then contributed more than \$750 million to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Iran expressed interest in a broader dialogue in 2002 and 2003. Instead, it was labeled part of an "axis of evil."

In 2005, reform-minded President Khatami was replaced by the hardliner, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. But the same Supreme Leader who authorized earlier overtures is still in office today and he acknowledged, as recently as January 2008, that "the day that relations with America prove beneficial for the Iranian nation, I will be the first one to approve of that." All this does not prove that Iran will bargain in good faith with us. But it does disprove the claim that we know for sure they will not.

Myth # 5. Iran has declared its intention to attack Israel in order to "wipe Israel off the map."

This claim is based largely on a speech by President Ahmadinejad on Oct. 26, 2005, quoting a remark by Ayatollah Khomeini made decades ago: "This regime that is occupying Qods [Jerusalem] must be wiped off/eliminated from the pages of history/our times." Both before and since, Ahmadinejad has made numerous other, offensive, insulting and threatening remarks about Israel and other nations – most notably his indefensible denial of the Holocaust. However, he has been criticized within Iran for these remarks. Supreme Leader Khamenei himself has "clarified" that "the Islamic Republic has never threatened and will never threaten any country" and specifically that Iran will not attack Israel unless Iran is attacked first. Ahmadinejad also has made clear, or been forced to clarify, that he was referring to regime change through demographics (giving the Palestinians a vote in a unitary state), not war. What we know is that Ahmadinejad's recent statements do not appear to have materially altered Iran's long-standing *policy* – which, for

Basic Misconceptions about Iran

decades, has been to deny the legitimacy of Israel; to arm and aid groups opposing Israel in Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank; but also, to promise to accept any deal with Israel that the Palestinians accept.

Myth # 6. U.S.-sponsored “democracy promotion” can help bring about true democracy in Iran.

Instead of fostering democratic elements inside Iran, U.S.-backed “democracy promotion” has provided an excuse to stifle them. That is why champions of human rights and democracy in Iran agree with the dissident who said, “The best thing the Americans can do for democracy in Iran is not to support it.”

Myth # 7. Iran is clearly and firmly committed to developing nuclear weapons.

If Iraq teaches anything, it is the need to be both rigorous and honest when confronted with ambiguous evidence about WMDs. Yet once again we find proponents of conflict over-stating their case, this time by claiming that Iran has declared an intention to acquire nuclear weapons. In fact, Iranian leaders have consistently denied any such intention and even said that such weapons are “against Islam.”

The issue is not what Iran is saying, but what it is doing, and here the facts are murky. We know that Iran is openly enriching uranium and learning to do it more efficiently, but claims this is only for peaceful use. There are detailed but disputed allegations that Iran secretly worked on nuclear weapons design before Ahmadinejad came to power, concerns that such work continues, and certainty that Iran is not cooperating fully with efforts to resolve the allegations. We also know that Iran has said it will negotiate on its enrichment program – without preconditions – and submit to intrusive inspections as part of a final deal. Past negotiations between Iran and a group of three European countries plus China and Russia have not gone anywhere, but the United States, Iran’s chief nemesis, has not been active in those talks.

The facts viewed as a whole give cause for deep concern, but they are not unambiguous and in fact support a variety of interpretations: that Iran views enrichment chiefly as a source of national pride (akin to our moon landing); that Iran is advancing towards weapons capability but sees

this as a bargaining chip to use in broader negotiations with the United States; that Iran is intent on achieving the capability to build a weapon on short notice as a deterrent to feared U.S. or Israeli attack; or that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons to support aggressive goals. The only effective way to illuminate – and constructively alter – Iran’s intentions is through skillful and careful diplomacy. History shows that sanctions alone are unlikely to succeed, and a strategy limited to escalating threats or attacking Iran is likely to backfire – creating or hardening a resolve to acquire nuclear weapons while inciting a backlash against us throughout the region.

Myth # 8. Iran and the United States have no basis for dialogue.

Those who favored refusing Iran’s offers of dialogue in 2002 and 2003 – when they thought the U.S. position so strong there was no need to talk – now assert that our position is so weak we cannot afford to talk. Wrong in both cases. Iran is eager for an end to sanctions and isolation, and needs access to world-class technology to bring new supplies of oil and gas online. Both countries share an interest in stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan, which border Iran. Both support the Maliki government in Iraq, and face common enemies (the Taliban and al-Qaeda) in Afghanistan. Both countries share the goal of combating narco-trafficking in the region. These opportunities exist, and the two governments have pursued them very occasionally in the past, but they have mostly been obscured in the belligerent rhetoric from both sides.

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About the Experts

Ali Banuazizi

Professor of Political Science and Director, Islamic Civilization and Societies Program, Boston College

Dr. Banuazizi is the Past President of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) and of the International Society for Iranian Studies. He served as the Editor of the Journal of Iranian Studies from 1968 to 1982. A leading expert on Iran and the Middle East Politics, he was a member of the Council of Foreign Relations' Task Force on Public Diplomacy.

Mehrzad Boroujerdi

Associate Professor of Political Science at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs; Founding Director of the Middle Eastern Studies Program

Dr. Boroujerdi is the author of *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (1996). His articles have appeared in numerous scholarly journals and more than a dozen edited books and Persian-language journals. He is the general editor of the Modern Intellectual and Political History of the Middle East series published by Syracuse University Press and served for seven years (2000 to 2007) as the book review editor of the International Journal of Middle East Studies. He is currently engaged in a major study of the current and next generation of political leaders in Iran.

Juan R.I. Cole

Richard P. Mitchell Collegiate Professor of History at the University of Michigan

Juan Cole commands Arabic, Persian and Urdu, and has lived in various places in the Muslim world for extended periods of time. He also brings three decades of experience in studying and writing about contemporary Islamic movements and the relationship of the West and the Muslim world. His most recent book, *Engaging the Muslim World*, will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in March 2009. He has a regular column at Salon.com and is a frequent guest commentator on national radio and television news shows.

Ambassador James F. Dobbins

Former Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Representative to the Afghan opposition in the wake of September 11, 2001

For over three decades, Ambassador Dobbins has served both Republican and Democratic administrations in diplomatic roles around the world, often in times of crisis. Immediately after September 11, 2001, he served as the Bush administration's Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Representative to the Afghan opposition, interacting successfully with the Iranians in a cooperative effort to topple the Taliban and promote the emergence of a friendly and democratic government in Kabul. His many other high-level posts include service as Assistant Secretary of State for Europe; Special Assistant to the President for the Western Hemisphere; Special Adviser to the President and Secretary of State for the Balkans; Ambassador to the European Community; and the Clinton Administration's Special Envoy for Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

Rola el-Husseini

Assistant Professor, the Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University

Rola el-Husseini specializes in Lebanon and Shi'a political thought. She is finishing a book on elite politics in postwar Lebanon, along with a comparative study of the impact of Iran on Iraqi and Lebanese Shi'a political thought. At the Bush School, she teaches courses on Middle East Politics, Political Islam, and Authoritarianism in the Arab World.

Farideh Farhi

Independent Researcher and Affiliate Graduate Faculty at the University of Hawai'i-Manoa

Farideh Farhi is the author of *States and Urban-Based Revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua* along with numerous articles and book chapters on contemporary Iranian politics and foreign policy. She also authored the Asia Society's report on Iran's 2001 elections; the International Crisis Group's report on the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran; and, a soon to be published World Bank study, *Contested Governance and the Need for Reform: The Case of the Islamic Republic of Iran*. She has taught at the University of Colorado, Boulder; University of Hawai'i; University of Tehran and Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran. Her research sponsors include the United States Institute of Peace, the Rockefeller

Foundation, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars where she was recently a Public Policy Scholar. She travels widely and lectures regularly on Iranian politics and foreign relations at research institutions in Washington, D.C. and around the country.

Geoffrey E. Forden

Research Associate in MIT's Program on Science, Technology and Society

Geoffrey Forden is among America's foremost experts on how proliferators acquire the know-how and industrial infrastructure to produce weapons of mass destruction. In 2002-2003, Dr. Forden served as the first Chief of Multidiscipline Analysis Section for UNMOVIC, the UN agency responsible for verifying and monitoring the dismantlement of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. He has also served as a strategic weapons analyst in the National Security Division of the Congressional Budget Office.

Hadi Ghaemi

Coordinator, International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran

Hadi Ghaemi is the coordinator of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, and an internationally recognized expert on the situation of human rights in Iran. Ghaemi's reports and writings have focused international attention on the Iranian government's repression of free speech and persecution of civil society activists. He works closely with human rights defenders inside Iran to document and report on human rights violations. In 2003, he received a research and writing grant from the MacArthur Foundation. He served as the Iran and UAE researcher for Human Rights Watch until 2007. Ghaemi received his Ph.D. in physics from Boston University in 1994, and he was on the faculty at the City University of New York until 2000.

Philip Giraldi

Former CIA Counter-terrorism Specialist

Philip Giraldi is a former CIA counter-terrorism specialist and military intelligence officer who served eighteen years overseas in Turkey, Italy, Germany, and Spain, where he was Chief of Base in Barcelona from 1989 to 1992. As a recognized authority on international security and counterterrorism issues he has appeared often on radio and TV, including "Good Morning America," "60 Minutes," MSNBC, NPR, BBC World News, FOX News, Polish National Television, Croatian National Television, al-Jazeera, and al-Arabiya. Currently, he is President of San Marco International, a consulting firm that specializes in international security management and risk assessment, and also a partner in Cannistraro Associates, a security consultancy located in McLean Virginia.

Farhad Kazemi

Professor of Politics and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University

As a leading scholar on issues of the Middle East, Dr. Kazemi is a member of the Advisory Group for Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World, appointed in 2003. He is also President of the Middle Eastern Studies Association, former President of the Society for Iranian Studies, and a leading member of such organizations as the American Political Science Association, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Atlantic Council.

Stephen Kinzer

Author and award-winning foreign correspondent

Stephen Kinzer is an award-winning foreign correspondent who has covered more than 50 countries on five continents – primarily for the New York Times, where he worked for more than 20 years. He is the author of numerous books and articles focusing on Iran and the Middle East, including *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* and *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*. He now teaches journalism and political science at Northwestern University, contributes articles to the New York Review of Books and other periodicals, and writes a world affairs column for The Guardian.

Ambassador William G. Miller

Senior Fellow, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Ambassador Miller has led a long and distinguished career in the U.S. Foreign Service, U.S. Senate staff, academia, foundations, and non-profit organizations. Ambassador Miller served as political officer for the U.S. Embassy in Tehran from 1962 to 1964 as well as the U.S. Consulate in Isfahan, Iran from 1959 to 1962. He then spent 14 years on Capitol Hill, where he served as the staff director for three different Senate committees, including the Select Committee on Intelligence. Ambassador Miller has taught at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, Tufts

University's Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy, and Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies.

Emile A. Nakhleh

Retired Senior Intelligence Service Officer and Director of the Political Islam Strategic Analysis Program in the Directorate of Intelligence at the CIA

During his fifteen years of service at the CIA, Dr. Emile A. Nakhleh held a variety of key positions, including Director of the Political Islam Strategic Analysis Program in the Directorate of Intelligence and Chief of the Regional Analysis Unit in the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Dr. Nakhleh was a founding member of the Senior Analytic Service and chaired the first SAS Council. He was awarded several senior intelligence commendation medals, including the Intelligence Commendation Medal (1997), the William Langer Award (2004), the Director's Medal (2004), and the Distinguished Career Intelligence Medal (2006). His research has focused on political Islam in the Middle East and the rest of the Muslim world as well as on political and educational reform, regime stability, and governance in the greater Middle East.

Augustus Richard Norton

Professor of International Relations and Anthropology at Boston University

A. Richard Norton served as an advisor to the Iraq Study Group (Baker-Hamilton Commission), and he is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. His research experience in the Middle East spans near three decades, including residences in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait and Lebanon. His current research interests include inter-sectarian relations in the Middle East, reformist Muslim thought, and strategies of political reform and opposition in authoritarian states. In the 1990s he headed a widely-cited three-year project funded by the Ford Foundation that examined the state-society relations in the Middle East and the question of civil society in the region. He is also a co-founder of the *Boston Forum on the Middle East* and the *Conference Group on the Middle East*.

Richard Parker

Executive Director, American Foreign Policy Project; Professor, University of Connecticut School of Law

Dr. Parker is a professor at University of Connecticut School of Law and Founder and Executive Director of the new American Foreign Policy Project (AFPP). AFPP convenes large teams of top experts to collaboratively develop sound policy on the toughest national security and foreign policy issues of the day. It translates these policies into effective messages in ready-to-use talking point format, and then disseminates these messages to leaders, key influencers and the public through a variety of channels – briefings, traditional media, blogs, and a unique, highly-searchable website, americanforeignpolicy.org. Dr. Parker has served as Assistant General Counsel in the Office of the United States Trade Representative and Special Counsel to the Deputy Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. He holds a B.A. in Public and International Affairs from Princeton University, a J.D. from Yale Law School, and a D.Phil. in International Relations from Oxford University, which he attended as a Rhodes Scholar.

Trita Parsi

Award-winning author; President, National Iranian-American Council

Trita Parsi is the author of *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Iran, Israel and the United States*, which won the 2008 Silver Medal Recipient of the Council on Foreign Relations Arthur Ross Book Award. Fluent in Persian/Farsi, Dr. Parsi is regularly consulted by Western, Middle Eastern and Asian governments on Middle East affairs, and he is a co-founder and current President of the National Iranian American Council, a non-partisan, non-profit organization promoting Iranian-American participation in American civic life. His articles on Middle East affairs have been published in the Financial Times, Jane's Intelligence Review, the Nation, The Wall Street Journal, The American Conservative, the Jerusalem Post, and elsewhere. He is also a frequent commentator on Middle Eastern affairs and has appeared on BBC World News, PBS NewsHour, CNN, Al Jazeera, and NPR, to name a few. He has also worked for the Swedish Permanent Mission to the UN, serving in the Security Council handling the affairs of Afghanistan, Iraq, Tajikistan and Western Sahara, and the General Assembly's Third Committee addressing human rights in Iran, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Iraq. Dr. Parsi was born in Iran and grew up in Sweden.

Ambassador Thomas Pickering

Vice-Chairman, Hills & Company; Former U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Russia, Israel and other nations

Ambassador Pickering has had a career spanning five decades as a U.S. diplomat, serving as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Ambassador to the United Nations, Ambassador to Russia, India, Israel, Nigeria, Jordan and El Salvador. He also served on assignments in Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. He holds the personal rank of Career Ambassador, the highest in the U.S. Foreign Service. He has held numerous other positions at the State Department, including Executive Secretary and Special Assistant to Secretaries Rogers and Kissinger and Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Oceans, Environmental and Scientific Affairs. He is currently Vice-chairman of Hills & Company, an international consulting firm providing advice to U.S. businesses on investment, trade, and risk assessment issues abroad, particularly in emerging market economies. He is based in Washington, DC.

Barnett R. Rubin

Director of Studies and Senior Fellow at the Center on International Cooperation of New York University; Former Special Advisor to the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan

Barnett Rubin has written numerous books and articles on conflict prevention, state formation, and human rights. His articles have appeared in Foreign Affairs, International Affairs, The New York Times, The Washington Post, The New York Review of Books, and elsewhere. In late 2001, he served as Special Advisor to the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan during the negotiations that produced the Bonn Agreement, and he also advised the United Nations on the drafting of the constitution of Afghanistan, the Afghanistan Compact, and the Afghanistan National Development Strategy. He has served as the Director of the Center for Preventive Action, and Director, Peace and Conflict Studies, at the Council on Foreign Relations, as well as the Director of the Center for the Study of Central Asia at Columbia University. Currently, he is Director of Studies and Senior Fellow at the Center on International Cooperation of New York University, where he directs the program on the Reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Gary G. Sick

Senior Research Scholar at Columbia University SIPA's Middle East Institute; Adjunct Professor of International Affairs at SIPA

Professor Sick served on the National Security Council under Presidents Ford, Carter, and Reagan. He was the principal White House aide for Iran during the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis. Sick is a Captain (Ret.) in the U.S. Navy, with service in the Persian Gulf, North Africa, and the Mediterranean. He was the deputy director for International Affairs at the Ford Foundation from 1982 to 1987, where he was responsible for programs relating to U.S. foreign policy. He is also a member of the board (emeritus) of Human Rights Watch in New York and the chairman of the Advisory Committee of Human Rights Watch/Middle East.

John Tirman

Executive Director & Principal Research Scientist, Center for International Studies, MIT

Tirman is the author or co-author and editor of ten books on international affairs and U.S. foreign policy, including *Terror, Insurgency, and States* (2007), *The Maze of Fear: Security & Migration After 9/11* (2004) and *By the Crusader's Sword: The Human Toll of American Wars* (forthcoming). His articles on Iran have appeared in a wide variety of periodicals, including the Boston Globe, Strategic Insights, and AlterNet, as well as reports published by MIT. He has organized projects on Iran, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and MIT, as well as a major historical research effort on the history of the U.S.-Iran relationship in partnership with The National Security Archive and Brown University's Watson Institute.

James Walsh

Research Associate, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Dr. Walsh's research and writings focus on international security, and in particular, topics involving weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. He has testified before the United States Senate on the issue of nuclear terrorism as well as on Iran's nuclear program. He has also chaired the Harvard University International Working Group on Radiological Terrorism. Among his current projects are two series of dialogues on nuclear issues, one with representatives from North Korea and one with leading figures in Iran. He has appeared frequently in the media as an expert on weapons of mass destruction and terrorism issues, including more than 300 appearances on CNN. His most recent publications include a chapter on Iran's nuclear program in *Terrorist Attacks and Nuclear Proliferation: Strategies for Overlapping Dangers* and a chapter on nuclear weapons in *A Muslim-Christian Study and Action Guide to the Nuclear Weapons Danger*. He has also published *Learning from Past Success: The NPT and the Future of Non-proliferation* for the Commission on Weapons of Mass Destruction, chaired by Hans Blix (2006).