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I understand that my remarks have been titled “Iran outsmarted the West.” It is an important subject to consider because we are now entering into a new period of negotiations between the permanent members of UN Security Council and Germany on one side and Iran on the other side. Much of these negotiations are under the rubric of the policy of engagement, which President Barack Obama suggested during the 2008 campaign and has become a hallmark of his approach to former adversaries like the Iranians.

Will the engagement possibly work, will it be possible to talk Iran into – or I should say out of – its nuclear program? I thought it is useful – this is one thing that I did in my book “The rise of nuclear Iran” – to look at how engagement worked in the past with Iran on a nuclear issue. Because people have engaged with Iran on a number of issues historically. Virtually every administration has.

We will look a little bit at the negotiation that occurred between 2003 and 2005 between the European Union Three and Iran. I am going to try and learn from this negotiation some lessons that we can apply to the contemporary situation. And I will reach, I believe, a conclusion that I fear: Iran is outsmarting the West.

I remember when I was writing my book, I wrote in one of the chapters that Iranians have invented chess. I got into a very big debate with my editors over whether it was the Iranians or the Indians that invented chess. But never mind. Iranians are very good chess players. And sometimes I think that on the Western side we have some people that are experts in checkers. And that makes an asymmetry in negotiating skills.

I will begin with the last negotiation begun in 2003 and the lessons of it. You might remember – we had actually a preview of what we are going through now back then. You know this year it was revealed that Iran has a secret enrichment facility in Qom. And that was the one that is expected to have the capacity to contain 3000 centrifuges. Well, back in 2002 there was another revelation of at least two facilities that Iranians have been working on for years. One was at Natanz, a facility for uranium enrichment. There was another facility in Istafan for what is called the conversion of uranium to produce feed stock for the Natanz facility. There was of course a third facility in a place called Arak, not Iraq, and Arak, with a heavy-water reactor, was under construction.

Those revelations created a tremendous dilemma for the Iranian leadership. They came out in 2002. The United States were gearing up for the Iraqi war at that time, talking about weapons of mass destruction of Saddam Hussein, not of Iran. And the Iranians could have faced severe sanctions, maybe even military action. So they found that the best route was to enter into negotiation process with the West, in which they would put their current nuclear assets, the one that had been known about, on the table for discussion.

And the United States, as I said, were busy with building the whole thing for the war in Iraq and agreed to allow the European Union to take the lead in these negotiations. The EU Three were Britain, France and Germany. They were negotiating in their national capacities with the Iranians, not like the EU, not as collective, and the negotiations went on between 2003 and 2005. Two agreements were reached. The original European goal was to reach a total suspension of uranium enrichment. What was reached was a temporary suspension of uranium enrichment, which, of course, Iran violated over time, and the entire

process essentially fell apart by the time you get to 2005 and election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of Iran.

Perhaps the most revealing insight into Iranian negotiating strategy on the nuclear issue is provided to us by the head Iranian nuclear negotiator Hassan Ruhani, who has also been the head of the Iranian National Security Council for about 16 years. Ruhani lost his job – he was associated with the regime of Khatami. As an ex-nuclear negotiator, but still somebody who was part of the Iranian establishment, he was briefing the Iranian élites in Tehran in a speech that was carried in an internal regime journal called Rahbar. The contents of this briefing were later leaked to Western newspapers – particularly to the Daily Telegraph and to the New York Times. The key sentence in that briefing that Ruhani stated was: “Why were we negotiating with the Europeans? Our engineers were working double shifts in Isfahan to complete the Isfahan conversion plan”.

I don't want to make this very complex with a lot of nuclear terminology, but just briefly – there are three basic stages in the production of nuclear fuel for nuclear weapons: first is the mining of the uranium or the initial conversion from the uranium to what is called the “yellow cake” – stage one. Stage two is taking the “yellow cake” and putting it through a conversion process to produce uranium hexafluoride gas – UF₆ gas: the conversion process.

And then the UF₆ gas goes into the centrifuges as a feed-stock, spin at extra-high speed and – voilà – you get at the end either low enriched uranium, which is appropriate for the nuclear reactors, or you will produce a high-enriched uranium, which can be used for atomic bombs. What Ruhani was saying was that we succeeded moving into stage two. In fact he added in his speech: “When we started the negotiations with the Europeans, we didn't have the Isfahan conversion plan, we had nothing”.

And by the time the negotiations were over, the conversion plan was up and running and they managed to convert 37 tons of “yellow cake” to UF₆ gas. Now we learnt two very important lessons from that period of time of what the Iranians achieve with negotiations. First – while they talked, they pushed their nuclear program forward.

The second important element was that they used the negotiating process with the West to fend off the Western pressures. Let's remember the dates: 2002 – the Iranian opposition reveals the Iranian nuclear program in Washington; Mujahidin Halk revealed the truth of what was known about the Iranian program.

The first UN Security Council Resolution, in which the UN goes after Iran, is in 2006. In other words, they used negotiations brilliantly to put off pressures on them for four years. It is only at that time the International Atomic Agency reports the Iranian file to the Security Council and the Security Council passes resolutions. So if I have to apply that history to the present tense, I would expect that when the Iranians sit together and try to come up with a negotiating strategy for the present, they are probably following a very simple, similar pattern.

A new facility was revealed near Qom. What do you have to do? You have to, first of all, fend off those international pressures. In fact, you might remember that in July of this year there was a meeting of the G-8 and it was decided at that meeting that in the month of September a deadline would be handed to Iran. And by the month of September – some would say by the meeting of G-20 in Pittsburgh – Iran had to come forward with a sincere plan, showing how it was going to address the concerns of the international community

from its continuing uranium enrichment plan. In other words, the forces were closing in on Iran. Had they ever had a sincere proposal?

Prior to this G-20 meeting in Pittsburgh, earlier in the month, the Iranians actually put a proposal on the table. It was five pages long, it was later publicized and I don't have better diplomatic words to describe it except for the word "drivel". Why "drivel"? Because there was nothing in there that was concrete. There was nothing there that corresponded to the expectations of the international community, established in the previous meeting in July. Instead what you had was a number of generalizations about the importance of denuclearizing the world. You had references to the change in the world order, where old powers were declining and new powers were raising and the need to address this new world order that was emerging.

That is fine for giving a pro-Iranian seminar for those that wanted to hear it, but that didn't answer the questions of the international community. There is nothing worse in the Middle East than to draw a line in the sand and to say "you have until September to come up with a plan" and then September comes and you have nothing. And then the West basically says: "OK".

Now, what happened in September, of course, was at the meeting of the Security Council, which President Obama chaired – the presidency of the Security Council was in the hands of the United States – and spoke about his vision of a nuclear-free world. Then, days later in Pittsburgh President Obama, Prime Minister Gordon Brown and President Sarkozy revealed the secret reactor enrichment plant near Qom.

What happened to the September deadline? Then it was President Sarkozy, if you read the three different statements, who said: "Well, we hope to have an answer until December". So September became December, even though they had all the reasons in the world to actually tighten pressures on Iran. Iran had to come up with a strategy to fend off possible pressures and it was not really very difficult to do so.

Therefore you have this proposal – well, they will take a good portion of the low enriched uranium, hand it to the Russian and then to the French, I don't have to repeat the whole thing that was explained in detail previously, but it captured the imagination of those who thought "Oh, negotiations are possible with Iran, it is possible to reach understanding with them". And that whole build-up that was going on toward the September deadline, around the revelations of the Qom enrichment plan just ... because of these vague proposals.

We will see whether these vague ideas will become a concrete program in the next period of time, but you have more time than on Iran's hands to negotiate this. Do you know how complicated this whole thing is? Taking the enriched uranium out of Iran, going to Russia and then going to France and then back to Iran and monitoring the whole thing – you can negotiate this for five years! I am exaggerating "five years", but it will give them time. And this is one of the most dangerous things that are occurring.

They fend off pressures, they get time to move their nuclear program forward. In the meantime, let's have a look at the state of the play in the US Congress. As all of you know, I am sure, there has been much talk in both Houses – in the Senate and in the House of representatives about putting a gasoline quarantine on Iran because of Iran's limited refinery capacity it has to import gasoline from ... Some say it is 40 percent of its gasoline, some say it is 25 percent. In any case it is a substantial amount.

When gasoline quotas were created by the Iranian government last time around, there were riots in Iran. Gasoline stations were set on fire. This is a sensitive subject. So if you put quarantine on gasoline in Iran, it will affect a lot of people and could be politically sensitive. What is happening now with these punitive measures that the Council is considering? Well, the relevant committee are the Committee of Senator Dodd and in the House Congressman Howard Berman. Both US lawmakers speak about the need to urgently advance. Essentially, that legislation is today trapped in the two committees. In other words, they made due committee work to move this legislation work at the committee level, but as long as there is negotiation process going on, it is hard to imagine the Obama administration will give them green light to move to a vote in the Senate and the House.

Which means that the Iranians, by engaging with the United States, as well as with the other Western countries, are maybe delaying the punitive measures against them, as they did in 2003. As they put off the Security Council resolution for four years.

That is a very dangerous trap. The big question, of course, is: Where are the Iranians in their program? And if you do some Google searches on this question, you will come up with US and Israeli experts and it will give you a whole salad of different dates – from 6 months from now until 2014.

What we are talking about is a nuclear weapon, or a nuclear warhead fitted on a missile, and that is probably also part of the debate. But frankly, I am concerned, because I don't think the intelligence agencies – and I say this on the basis of an outside assessment, I don't have access to information – can get that kind of precise information about nuclear programs. Nuclear programs are the crown jewels for any country, the most guarded secrets, and Iran is a country that knows how to guard secrets. It has years of experience in the field of intelligence and counterintelligence.

The nuclear program is not just in the hands of civilians who are careless to lose a laptop to the West, but that program is in the hands of the Revolutionary Guards. It is a military program. So I don't think one can say in a definitive way where this program is ahead right now. The National Intelligence Estimate is a great example, I know that has been raised previously of how wrong it can be.

You know, if you read the National Intelligence Estimate, it says at the top of the summary "We believe with high confidence that Iran halted its nuclear program in 2003". And then you look at the end of the sentence and there is a footnote, and you go to the bottom of the page and you see what they mean by nuclear program. What the term nuclear program means. So it explains in the footnote: "By nuclear program we mean weaponization and clandestine conversion in the nuclear facilities". The second part is interesting. They are saying that Iran ended in 2003 its weaponization, i.e. making a warhead and clandestine enrichment and conversion facilities.

On the plant near Qom, the enrichment plant, two administration officials appeared before a press conference and gave an intelligence briefing, which was put on the Internet. And if you read that, these intelligence briefers were saying that United States knew about the Qom facility for several years. Now, several years... They give this briefing in 2009 – how far back these several years go? If it was in 2008, they would not use the word "several". Then maybe it is 2007? And maybe 2006? But let's think it was 2007, meaning that when NIE came out and pulled the plug and all the tension about the Iranian nuclear program and asserted that the Iranians, among other things, had halted a clandestine enrichment program, they knew in fact about the Qom facility.

I don't know about Israel assessing the NIE, I don't know if Israel has an NIE to put forward like that. But let's talk about that. So what does that mean? It means that, on one hand, in 2007 the US said there were no clandestine facilities anymore that are operating and, on the other hand, you had them building this Qom facility, which they knew about. And which is a clandestine enrichment facility.

What I am trying to say is that the world of intelligence assessments about nuclear programs is very unclear. Therefore we have the responsibility, as people concerned about the future of Israel and Jewish people, to come up with an approach that is responsible. My conclusion that I am sharing with you as a private citizen is that we cannot take risks. I tend to think that Iran is much further along than many people think. I believe there are several other sources that came out public and that are giving us glimpse of the secret world of intelligence. They would indicate that there are other clandestine facilities that have not been either publicly uncovered or the intelligence agencies haven't discovered.

Some, like the Daily Telegraph, report seven facilities, reflecting the British assessment. There is David Sagor in the New York Times, who wrote an outstanding book called "The inheritance" and he refers to 12 facilities being the American assessment. All we have found is one near Qom.

Given that this is the state of play, given the Iranian determination to achieve a nuclear weapon capability, I think we have to use all our political strength, all our persuasive powers to make sure the West realizes its own interest, not just the interest of Israel, which is to halt the Iranian nuclear program. We cannot allow ourselves to become complacent. There is a whole...industry in the United States I can speak about, which is anxious to put everybody to sleep.

There are important journalists, there are important intellectuals, there are ex-officials, who all work to put out stories to put us to sleep. We have responsibility to wake people up and take action. And, hopefully, the Western governments will realize what their interests are. When I hear President Sarkozy, the urgency in his voice, I think he understands what France's concerns are. And I have met Arab leaders from the Gulf. When they speak, the urgency is coming out of them, it is there.

But nonetheless there are people who are going to tell you "No, the Iranians are not going to develop nuclear program", saying that the development of a nuclear program, a nuclear development program will be a moral. So again, if we have the responsibility to wake people up, not to listen to those assessments of nonsense and to try and get the West focus on realizing its interest just protecting itself from the nuclear Iran.