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Guest editorial: Meeting gives U.S. a unique chance

By Sean Foley, Ph.D.

President Barack Obama's decision to accept Iran's five-page platform for talks starting Oct. 1 represents a defining moment in his young administration and for U.S. foreign policy. For the first time in several years, U.S. diplomats will attend talks with their Iranian counterparts. Even if the current multi-party negotiations produce no breakthroughs, they are a key opportunity to improve America's position in the Middle East that we cannot overlook.

To begin with, Iran is a major producer of oil and gas and maintains great influence throughout the Middle East, including in Afghanistan and Iraq, where tens of thousands of U.S. troops are now deployed. It is difficult to see how issues critical to U.S. foreign policy from drug production in Afghanistan to the unity of Iraq to the Arab-Israeli conflict can be resolved without at least Iran's tacit approval. Tehran also supplied valuable assistance to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001 and could provide an alternative route to either Pakistan or Russia for provisioning NATO forces in that land-locked county. Such a route may be needed soon, as Taliban forces have repeatedly cut NATO supply lines in Pakistan and Moscow increasingly sees Western forces in Afghanistan as a threat to Russia's interests in Central Asia.

Sanctions won't work

Diplomacy is even more critical to U.S. efforts to address the one issue noticeably absent from Iran's platform for talks in October, its nuclear program.

While Tehran maintains that its program is for civilian purposes only and complies with all nuclear and non-proliferation treaties, U.S. officials fear that Iran is building a nuclear weapon. Israeli leaders share this view and see Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's verbal attacks on Israel and denial of the Holocaust as a clear threat to their country's survival. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has even threatened to attack Iran if the international community fails to stop Tehran's nuclear program. For its part, Iran has stated that it would retaliate in a variety of ways to an Israeli strike, including attacks on U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Preventing such a nightmare, however, is complicated by the fact that Washington has few tools to influence Iranian decisions. Economic sanctions make little sense because the U.S. lacks significant trade ties with Iran, and Iran's chief trading partners (China, Russia, and Western Europe) generally do not see its nuclear program as a threat. Nor would U.S. military action be any less dangerous to U.S. forces than an Israeli one would be. Ultimately, the one viable route for Washington to prevent an Israeli attack is negotiations with Iran.

Finally, Republican and Democratic presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to George H.W. Bush conducted negotiations with an infinitely more dangerous adversary than Iran, the Soviet Union. Not only did the Soviet Union possess thousands of nuclear weapons, but its government also committed unspeakable human rights abuses against its own citizens — abuses far more egregious than Iran's brutal crackdown on democracy protesters earlier this year. If Americans could negotiate successfully with the Soviet Union, it is worth at least trying to talk to Iran.
