

Lieberman Discusses Next Steps on Iran

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Senator Joe Lieberman (ID-CT) today discussed U.S.-Iranian relations at a forum co-hosted by the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution. In his address, Senator Lieberman said:

“The bottom line is this: it is not enough for the Iranians to engage in a process in Geneva today. That process needs to yield results—and quickly.”

Below is the full text of his remarks as prepared for delivery:

Thank you so much for that kind introduction, Dany. I am grateful to the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution for joining together to organize this morning's event, which takes place at a pivotal moment in the relations between the United States and Iran. And I am honored to be followed by the panel of thoughtful analysts you have brought together.

As we speak, senior diplomats from the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and China are sitting down in Geneva with a representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This meeting of the P5+1 marks the first face-to-face contact between the American and the Iranian governments since President Obama came to office more than nine months ago, pledging to pursue direct dialogue with Tehran.

Today's meeting also takes place in the shadow of the disclosure less than a week ago of the existence of a covert uranium enrichment plant, built into a mountain on a military base controlled by the IRGC outside the city of Qom.

The secret construction of this facility, whose size, configuration, and location are inconsistent with a peaceful energy program, fits into a pattern of deception and concealment by the Iranians about their nuclear activities that stretches back over twenty years. It also adds to the already substantial body of incriminating evidence that Iran is secretly, steadily developing a nuclear weapons capability.

I have supported President Obama's decision to make a good faith effort to engage the Iranian government in direct diplomacy. By doing so, the President has put the global spotlight exactly where it belongs: on Iran's intransigence.

Unfortunately, however, there has been nothing in the Iranian leaders' behavior since President Obama came to office to ever suggest they are now any more likely to reciprocate the President's good faith, or accept their responsibilities under international law, than they were on January 20th. On the contrary, there is significant evidence past and present that gives us reason to believe that they will try to exploit the current attempt at engagement by the West, just as they have exploited past attempts at engagement, as an opportunity to ensnare us in a process without end, while they continue to advance toward a nuclear breakout.

I know that there are some who argue that, in the wake of the protests following Iran's June 12 election, the Iranian regime will now be more amenable to striking a deal, in order to defuse tensions at home. I disagree. It seems to me that what we have witnessed in recent months in Iran is a consolidation of power within the regime by its most hard-line elements.

As a result, I fear that we are now dealing with an Iranian leadership that is even more ideologically inflexible, and thus less likely to accept negotiated compromises and agreements—including ones that are in their national self-interest. The fact is, the Iranians have lied and cheated and violated their obligations under international law for years—and thus far, they have gotten away with it. So why would they now change course?

That's why I am so skeptical that today's discussions will lead to an agreement ending Iran's nuclear program. The fact is the Iranian leaders have not yet clearly agreed to put their illicit nuclear activities on the agenda. If the P5+1 plus Iran cannot reach public agreement that Iran's nuclear weapons program is the major topic of engagement among them today, then there is no point in continuing this process, and we and our allies should get up and leave—promising to return only when and if Iran is willing to begin serious discussions to end their illicit nuclear activities and normalize their relations with the rest of the world, including the United States.

If our engagement with Iran is to have credibility, the parties need to emerge from the meeting in Geneva today with a set of clear and credible benchmarks for mutual steps forward and a timetable for meeting them. These benchmarks must include verifiable suspension of all enrichment activities, as repeatedly demanded by the UN Security Council, and full cooperation with the IAEA to resolve all outstanding questions about Iran's nuclear-related activities.

Indeed, in the wake of last week's disclosure, there is renewed urgency and imperative surrounding the question of what else the Iranians have been hiding. Given that the international community has now twice uncovered secret enrichment facilities in Iran, it is reasonable to suspect there are likely others as well.

Their past actions put the burden of proof on Iran. The only way for the Iranians to prove otherwise is for them to provide the IAEA with full, unrestricted access to every site, every scientist, every scrap of paper, and every piece of equipment that they want to see.

I know these are significant demands—but they are justified by past Iranian evasions and deceptions. And they are the only way for the Iranian government to convince us that this time they really are serious about engagement with the United States.

We must not repeat the mistake with Iran that we made with North Korea, where we repeatedly convinced ourselves that it was better to accept half-measures, in the hope of winning more complete cooperation later, than it was to abandon the negotiating process.

The bottom line is this: it is not enough for the Iranians to engage in a process in Geneva today. That process needs to yield results—and quickly.

My own belief is that the current Iranian leadership will only consider stepping back from the nuclear brink when they are convinced that if they fail to do so, there will be consequences so severe that the continuity of their regime will be threatened.

Recently there has been renewed discussion about the range of possible sanctions we might impose against Iran if the engagement that begins today fails. My own view is that there is not going to be any one silver economic bullet. Rather, we must be prepared to impose multiple sanctions, with multiple partners, simultaneously or sequentially.

This means looking not only at actions we can take through the UN Security Council, but also through regional organizations, ad hoc coalitions of like-minded countries, and unilaterally.

It also means passing legislation here in Congress to strengthen the President's hand.

Five months ago, Senators Evan Bayh, Jon Kyl, and I introduced legislation—the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act—that will amend the 1996 Iran Sanctions Act to allow the President to sanction foreign companies that are involved in the sale of gasoline and other refined petroleum products to Iran, or that provide insurance or shipping for the delivery of these products to Iran, or that assist Iran in developing its own refineries.

The logic behind our approach is simple. Although blessed with immense oil wealth, Iran—due to the economic mismanagement of its leaders—lacks the capacity to meet its domestic demand for gasoline and other refined petroleum products. As a result, it must rely heavily on imports for as much as 40 percent of its gasoline needs. Our legislation will provide the President with the explicit authority to target this Achilles heel.

As of today, the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act has 76 cosponsors in the Senate. Its companion in the House of Representatives, put forward by Congressman Howard Berman, has been sponsored by 317 members of Congress.

Earlier this week, my colleague, Senator Chris Dodd, the Chairman of the Banking Committee, announced that he intends to take our legislation and combine it with his own set of proposals for sanctions on Iran, to create a new comprehensive bill. I am grateful for Chris' leadership on this issue, and I look forward to working with him in the weeks ahead to move this important legislation forward and get it to the President's desk as soon as possible.

I know that some have recently questioned the use of gasoline sanctions, saying that the Iranian regime will exploit whatever economic damage these sanctions inflict to rally the population against the United States. I do not doubt that the Iranian regime will try to do this, not just in response to gasoline sanctions but in response to any kind of economic sanctions that are disruptive to their economy. However, any sanction that isn't disruptive

to the Iranian economy isn't worth imposing, since it is unlikely to affect the regime's decision-making about their nuclear activities.

I also believe that the Iranian people are smart enough to know who is to blame, in the event that tough sanctions are imposed on their country. President Obama, after all, has gone out of his way to make clear that he is eager to build a new relationship with the Iranian nation, provided its government lives up to its international obligations. If Iran's leaders choose not to seize the historic opportunity that our President has given them, responsibility for what follows will be theirs, and I am confident the Iranian people will understand that.

Finally, regardless of whether the Obama administration's engagement with the Iranian government succeeds or fails, there is both a strategic and moral imperative to expand our engagement with the Iranian people. Indeed, I suspect that even more than international sanctions on gasoline or shipping or lines of credit, the thing that the Iranian regime really fears most are the legitimate demands for justice and freedom of its own citizens, and their desire to take their rightful place in the community of nations.

That is why, earlier this year, together with Senator McCain, Senator Kaufman, and others, I introduced the VOICE Act, which will strengthen the ability of the Iranian people to get access to accurate news and information, and overcome the electronic censorship and monitoring efforts of the Iranian regime.

I'm pleased that the Senate unanimously adopted our bipartisan bill as an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act. And it looks like the Conference Committee will accept it as well.

I sincerely hope and pray that the discussions today in Geneva succeed in altering the dynamic of our relationship with Iran. However, if they do not, we must be prepared to use all means at our disposal to prevent the Iranian regime from getting nuclear weapons.

My friends, the dangers of a nuclear Iran cannot be denied, diminished, or dismissed.

The dangers begin with the essential nature of the regime in Tehran. We must be clear about what this fanatical regime that has ruled Iran for 30 years has done to a great nation and a great people. It has brutally suppressed its own people and menaced its neighbors – Sunni and Shia; Arab and Israeli; Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. It has the blood of hundreds and hundreds of Americans on its hands, from those killed in the Marine barracks in Beirut to those murdered by IRGC-trained terrorists in Iraq.

A nuclear-armed Iran will overturn the balance of power in the Middle East and tilt this critical region toward extremism. It will empower Iran's terrorist proxies, like Hamas and Hezbollah, and doom any chance for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. It will deal a death blow to the global nonproliferation regime, as other countries rush to go nuclear, having seen that the world's most powerful and prosperous countries—despite multiple UN Security Council declarations—lack the will to enforce the world's most important

international laws. And I promise you—in a globalized world—the consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran will sooner or later come to threaten the American people here at home.

The question now is not whether we recognize the nature of the challenge that we face, or the catastrophic consequences if we fail to address it. I am sure we do. The question is whether we, as a nation and as a community of nations, can summon the determination and unity to meet that challenge—and avoid those consequences. It is clear that we must. I pray that we will.

Thank you.

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