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Fw: Washington Post article on Administration's Iran policy

From: Mills, Cheryl D MillsCD@state.gov

To: hdr22@clintonemail.com

Subject: Fw: Washington Post article on Administration's Iran policy

Fyi

From: LaVine, Christopher M
To: NEWS-Mahogany
Cc: NEWS-NEA; SES-O; Knopf, Payton L; Hale, David M; NEWS-Iran
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Colleagues,
Ops thought you might be interested in this WPost article on the Administration's Iran policy. Thank you,
Regards,
Chris LaVine
Operations Center

Writings Offer Look at Administration Debate on Iran

By Glenn Kessler
Washington Post Staff Writer
Friday, January 30, 2009; A12

President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in the past week have sent repeated signals to Iran that the door is now wide open for direct talks between the two countries three decades after the Iranian revolution, but U.S. officials say the method, the pace and the tenor of that diplomacy still remain to be settled.

But while officials say a plan will not be in place for several months, key players in the discussions have outlined their views in papers they wrote before joining the administration, giving a unique window into the administration's debate.

Obama, during a private discussion with Jewish leaders a year ago, also provided a road map to his thinking. "The time, I believe, has come to talk directly to the Iranians and to lay out our clear terms: their end of pursuit of nuclear weapons, an end of their support of terrorism and an end of their threat to Israel and other countries in the region," Obama said, according to a transcript. Bigger "carrots," he said, will give the United States more leverage to win support for sanctions if Iran rebuffs the approach.

One complicating factor is that Iran will hold a presidential election in June. American officials want to avoid taking steps that might bolster the stature of the current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose anti-Semitic rants and hostile attitude toward the West make him a potentially difficult interlocutor for diplomatic outreach.

Another complicating factor is that the United States and five other powers have demanded that Iran suspend its uranium enrichment program before substantive talks can begin on its nuclear program. Any sudden change in that approach may alarm allies.

Finally, the government in Iran is so opaque that officials want to be sure they are communicating with the right power centers.

"It is unclear who exactly that dialogue would be with in Iran," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said yesterday.

Dennis Ross, the former Middle East envoy who will be Clinton's senior adviser on Iran, has recommended that the initial approach to Iran take place through a "direct, secret back channel," which would be one way to avoid empowering Ahmadinejad or publicly undercutting the ongoing nuclear negotiations.

"Keeping it completely private would protect each side from premature exposure and would not require either side to publicly explain such a move before it was ready," Ross wrote in a lengthy paper, titled "Diplomatic Strategies for Dealing With Iran," published by the Center for a New American Security in September. "It would strike the Iranians as more significant and dramatic than either working through the Europeans or non-officials -- something that is quite familiar."

Ross said the United States should ask the Iranian representative during the private talks to explain how his government sees U.S. goals toward Iran and how Iran thinks the United States perceives Iranian goals. The purpose of this dialogue, he wrote, is to "find a way to show the Iranians that we are prepared to listen and to try to understand Iranian concerns and respond to them, but ultimately no progress can be made if our concerns cannot also be understood and addressed."

Ross conceded that it may be difficult "to set up such a direct channel that is also authoritative," because in the Iranian system, the president has much less power than the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Another top Obama adviser, Gary Samore of the Council on Foreign Relations, argued for a more public approach, without requiring Iran to suspend its enrichment activities: direct bilateral talks, preferably with a representative of the supreme leader, that would cover a range of issues, including the nuclear program, U.S.-Iranian relations, Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Samore, who will be the top nonproliferation official at the White House National Security Council, co-authored with Bruce Riedel of the Brookings Institution a paper published last month that outlined this concept.

The Bush administration had some secret contacts with Iranian officials before the Iraq war and held ambassador-to-ambassador meetings in Iraq and Afghanistan. But it never attempted a broad dialogue, despite an apparent effort by some Iranian officials to reach out after Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was toppled in 2003. Samore recommended that the administration proceed "cautiously" and develop its negotiating strategy through "high-level bilateral and multilateral consultations" with the governments seeking to negotiate with Iran -- Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China -- and with Middle Eastern allies.

It was important, Samore said, that the United States not be seen as abandoning the larger framework for nuclear talks; in fact, "opening a bilateral channel with Iran may help invigorate the multilateral process."

A top State Department official, Undersecretary William J. Burns, will begin such consultations when he meets with representatives to the Iran negotiating group in Europe next week. A senior European diplomat said yesterday that European leaders would welcome a U.S.-Iranian dialogue but that it must be handled carefully. "The possibility of a dialogue with the U.S. is a very important card in our game" with Iran, he said. "We don't have many cards left."

A more provocative approach was advocated by John Brennan, Obama's White House director for counterterrorism, in a paper published in July. Brennan pressed for toning down rhetorical jabs at Iran and ignoring anti-American comments from Iranian officials, and also stressed the need for a presidential envoy to handle negotiations with Iran. In order to smooth the path for dialogue, he also argued for the "political courage" to admit that Iran has significantly scaled back its use of terrorism in the past decade. "It would not be foolhardy" to encourage greater assimilation of Hezbollah -- the armed political movement backed by Syria and Iran -- in the Lebanese political system, even though Washington officially considers Hezbollah a terrorist organization, Brennan wrote.

Another important policymaker, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, pressed for a carefully focused dialogue when he co-led a Council on Foreign Relations task force on Iran in 2004. "A 'grand bargain' that would settle comprehensively the outstanding conflicts between Iran and the United States is not realistic," the task force concluded. Instead, the United States should selectively engage Iran on issues where the U.S. and Iranian interests converge and build on incremental progress.

Gates, a holdover from the Bush administration, felt it was important such discussions begin before the nuclear concerns were resolved -- a position that puts him firmly in sync with Obama's approach.