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Middle East Forum debate

US Military Action Against Iran: Hype or Possibility?

Thursday 30 March 2006, 18.30-20.00

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

Speakers: **Professor Timothy Garton Ash**, Professor of European Studies,
Oxford University and Columnist, The Guardian

Professor Nasser Hadian, Tehran University

Dr Patrick Clawson, Deputy Director for Research, Washington
Institute for Near East Policy

Mary Riddell, Columnist, The Observer

Chair: **John Simpson**, World Affairs Editor, BBC

John Simpson

John Simpson began by noting the timely nature of the debate: he pointed out that Iran had effectively been offered the choice between coming to the negotiating table and risking the consequences. During a recent trip to Berlin, Jack Straw had suggested that Iran be referred to the Security Council for possible sanctions should it not comply with the Security Council's rulings. By contrast, Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, had commented that sanctions were absolutely out of the question and it was a matter for the International Atomic Energy Agency to deal with. Despite the apparent disparity in these two perspectives, John Simpson noted that Condoleeza Rice had commented that these discussions had demonstrated the unity of the international community on this issue!

Mr Simpson stressed that the purpose of the evening's debate was not to establish the rights and wrongs of Iran's nuclear pretensions or how far they would extend but rather to focus on the issue of military intervention. He reminded the audience that President Bush had stated that he would not allow Iran to become a nuclear power whilst Vice-President Dick Cheney had suggested last year that, should Iran persist in its pursuit of nuclear weapons and technology, it seemed likely that Israel would take action against Iran. In such an eventuality, Mr Cheney had stated that the international community would 'pick up the diplomatic pieces'.

Mr Simpson further noted that Senator John McCain, not one usually noted for his hawkish tendencies in foreign policy terms (see for example his position on the issue of

Iraq), had commented that there would be only one thing worse than US military action in Iran and that would be Iran in possession of a nuclear weapon. However Mr Simpson noted that Iran had insisted that it had no such intentions and would stick to its avowed objective of developing a nuclear fuel cycle, insisting that it has the right to act in its own interests. The nuclear issue has united Iranians from otherwise diverse social and political perspectives, including Iranian monarchists.

John Simpson commented that Iran was an extraordinarily complicated country but one which was widely misunderstood beyond the Middle East (for example, he cited the durability of certain inaccurate stereotypes, noting that few would imagine that there were more women than men in Iranian universities). He stressed that the focus of the debate should be on whether Iran was likely to develop a nuclear weapon at some point, noting that 2010 seemed to be the earliest estimate for the development of Iranian nuclear weaponry. Mr Simpson suggested that the speakers should consider when the US might take action: would US military action occur if enrichment continues? Or would it be Israel that took action against Iran? He cited the example of Israel's 1981 strike against the Osirak reactor in Iraq which was at the centre of Saddam Hussein's nuclear programme. He pointed out that it had been argued that this preventative strike had had the adverse effect of driving Iraq's nuclear programme underground – clearly a highly dangerous alternative. John Simpson asked whether the US was capable of taking such action given past intelligence failures. He asked whether NATO or Israel were similarly capable, particularly given that certain key aspects of Iran's nuclear programme were known to be underground.

John Simpson stated that the panellists should address two key questions in their comments: firstly, did Iran intend to channel its nuclear efforts into the construction of a nuclear weapon? Secondly would the US be prepared to bomb Iran if it was unable to reach some sort of agreement?

Professor Patrick Clawson

Professor Clawson said that the answer to the first question was that US did not care. He pointed out that Iran's announced intention was to produce a nuclear fuel cycle which, in the words of Mohamed ElBaradei of the IAEA, would put Iran a few months away from obtaining nuclear weapons. Professor Clawson stressed that this was Iran's announced intention. He noted that the Shah's nuclear fuel cycle had not been considered acceptable by the United States and that it was certainly not acceptable to the US for the Islamic Republic of Iran to have a nuclear fuel cycle, particularly given that Iran's poor record over the past fifteen years concerning the obligations of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Professor Clawson stated that the NPT was founded on certain rights and obligations for signatories: the obligation of transparency conferred the right to certain technologies and privileges. Professor Clawson argued that contrary to these principles, the approach of the regime in Tehran had been characterised by a lack of clarity. Clarity and openness was demanded from signatories of the NPT in return for assistance with dangerous technologies. He stated that, as Mohamed ElBaradei had said, it was necessary for Iran to re-establish international confidence in its agenda before proceeding with dangerous technologies.

Professor Clawson posed the question as to whether Iran had taken the decision to construct nuclear armaments: he suggested that Iran may have made some decisions regarding weaponization, pointing out that Iran had recently tested the Shahab 3 missile which has a warhead specifically designed to carry nuclear weapons following an early Soviet model. Professor Clawson stated that it was difficult to see what use such missiles

would have apart from for the deployment of nuclear weapons, given their relative lack of accuracy for other strategic purposes.

He pointed out that what he had said so far was entirely based on Iran's public statements, rather than on US intelligence but that in fact, US policy in this area was largely based on US intelligence. This intelligence suggested that Iran would not be capable of developing nuclear weapons for some years. Such intelligence had encouraged US policy makers to take a more long-term approach: 'we have time, so we can take our time'.

Professor Clawson acknowledged that this was an optimistic analysis as Iran had announced its intention to create 3,000 centrifuges by 2007. Iran already had 700 operational centrifuges, 400 non-operational centrifuges and was constructing new centrifuges at a rate of approximately 70-100 per month. Professor Clawson noted that if Iran had the ability to reach 3,000 centrifuges in a year, it would have the technical capability to construct nuclear weapons within another year, as the IISS had indicated. However Professor Clawson stated that US political judgement suggested that this would not occur for some time and there was sufficient time to build a broad international coalition.

The attitude of the Bush administration was that the Iran issue was going 'quite nicely, thank you'. He pointed out that the discrepancy between EU and US positions on Iran which existed five years ago had now been largely removed. One of the toughest stances on the issue emanated from Paris not Washington whilst the Russians were slowly coming round to a comparative point of view: two years ago, international opinion held that it was impossible for the US to pursue its aim of referring Iran to the Security Council for non-compliance on this issue. Professor Clawson suggested that there was an impression in the Bush administration that the reason why the situation was currently working 'quite nicely' was, in part, because the US was participating in a multilateral consensus led by the EU. This was not a usual or a comfortable position for the US to be in and one that a number of foreign services professionals in the US were uncomfortable with given the United States' status as a superpower. He noted that this included a number of his liberal friends but pointed out that whatever the EU had asked the US to do, it had done. He noted that this was not a natural position for the Bush administration.

Professor Clawson argued that this situation placed a heavy burden of responsibility on the EU since the current situation represented something of a test-case for European diplomacy. Should the EU fail, it would fall to the US to resolve the issue in a repeat of the situation in Bosnia. He pointed out that the result of the European failure to deal adequately with the situation in Bosnia was the necessity of American intervention. This intervention had created the impression that the US was an 'indispensable power'; an impression which had been highly damaging both for America and for the international community as a whole. Professor Clawson stressed that the Iranian nuclear issue provided an interesting test as to whether Europe might play an important role in world affairs. He argued that it was important for both Europe and the United States that Europe should succeed.

Professor Clawson pointed out that diplomacy needed to be backed up with force, citing the following quotation: 'Diplomacy has to be backed up by pressure and, in extreme cases, by force. We have rules. We have to do everything possible to uphold the rules through conviction and if necessary, through force.' Professor Clawson asked the audience which neoconservative they thought had said this, before attributing it to

Mohamed El-Baradei. He stressed that the head of a United Nations Agency had commented that force was a necessary component of diplomacy, albeit as a last resort.

The most urgent calls for the issue to be resolved were coming from the two senators likely to be running in the 2009 US presidential elections, Senator John McCain and Senator Hillary Clinton. Professor Clawson reiterated that there was a broad coalition in the US which supported the remarkably modest statement of President Bush that it was unacceptable for Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. He stressed that President Bush did not say that it was unacceptable for Iran to develop a fuel cycle nor to disobey the regulations of the IAEA, or to suspend IAEA inspections beyond the bare minimum - only that it was unacceptable for Iran to construct nuclear weapons. This, he commented, was hardly a controversial statement.

Professor Clawson turned to the question of when the United States should use military force and what the nature of that force might be. He commented that he would give a two-part answer: first of all, he noted that the United States was already using force in the region to respond to the Iranian nuclear threat. He noted that most of the military force used by the US worldwide was deployed primarily in a defensive capacity. As US Under-Secretary of State Bob Joseph had explained earlier in the month, the US was involved in extensive measures about the Iranian military programme. The US was, he said, working with a variety of states in the region on the development of anti-ballistic missile programmes to counter the threat of ballistic missiles from Iran. In addition, Professor Clawson reminded the audience that the United States did indeed have spies in the region and re-affirmed that an intelligence judgement was at the very heart of the Bush administration's doctrine on Iran and that judgement was that there was sufficient time to build a consensus.

Professor Clawson noted that some people were saying that defensive action was sustainable over the long term and that the US should contain and deter Iran as a response to the Iranian nuclear programme. He commented that containment and deterrence were among the most difficult and costly military objectives to achieve. He stressed that, although such action would be demanding on Allied forces in the medium term and although it would represent a risky policy, it would have to be considered. If it were necessary to contain and deter a 'nuclear-ready' Iran (a term used to convey the ambiguous nature of Iran's current status), it would be necessary to prepare to defend the Straits of Hormuz, given the Chairman of the Iranian Foreign Affairs Committee's threats to close them. Similarly any threat to Turkey would result in a number of other regional and international players being drawn into the situation as a result of treaty obligations to defend Turkey under the framework of NATO. This would be an expensive and complicated process that would require European assistance. Professor Clawson stressed that if containment and deterrence were to be the policy of choice, the US would not be pursuing it alone.

Professor Clawson turned next to consider the issue of preventative action: he stated that preventative action would only be taken by the US should it be provoked by Iran, adding that the Iranian President had demonstrated a willingness in the past to make provocative and controversial public statements. He suggested that it would only be prudent for the US to draw up contingency plans in case Iran should pursue its announced objectives. Professor Clawson pointed out that Chancellor Merkel had recently highlighted the importance of taking at face value the announced intentions of states no matter how bizarre they might seem.

Professor Clawson turned to consider what form any preventative military action would take should it occur. He addressed the argument that the engagement of the US military in neighbouring Iraq rendered US military action in Iran impossible: on the contrary, whilst the US army and marine corps were currently occupied in Iraq, the air-force and the navy were, relatively speaking, free and keen to prove their use. Secondly, he addressed the argument that the impact of any strikes would be restricted by the underground location of key Iranian installations. Studies of Iran's nuclear programme had determined that it depended upon a chain of installations including certain key 'nodes' which would be vulnerable to attack: a military strike would target the weak links in the chain not the strong links. However, surgical strikes would be impossible since Iran's inevitable retaliation would undoubtedly lead to war. This would clearly be highly costly and would not be engaged in lightly. Indeed he stressed that the full diplomatic process would undoubtedly be played out before such attacks were considered and it seemed most likely that covert action would be employed first. By way of illustration, he pointed out that the nuclear programme, being composed of highly specialised industrial processes and reliant upon sophisticated computer equipment, might be vulnerable to computer viruses.

Regarding the possibility of regime change in Iran, Professor Clawson pointed out that, whilst the US had favoured regime change in Cuba for the last 45 years but accomplished relatively little, it had recently announced a series of initiatives to encourage regime change in Iran. The US government currently allocated considerable funds to initiatives aimed at encouraging regime change in Iran. These include measures such as Persian language websites, the Voice of America radio broadcasts and a number of University scholarships for study abroad. Professor Clawson said that these initiatives totalled \$65 million with the rest of the funds being allocated to human rights groups. Such policies, he said, were clearly appropriate in moral terms and would doubtless continue with or without the nuclear issue.

Professor Clawson commented that the US was known internationally as a 'busybody' for its criticism of those states with poor human rights records and suggested that this would continue. He closed his remarks with a reminder of the unpredictability of change in international politics. President Regan's 1987 speech demanding the dismantling of the Berlin Wall had met with widespread derision yet subsequent events had demonstrated the difficulty of predicting the pace of developments in international politics. He commented that there was no way of accurately predicting a revolution or the pace of change.

Professor Timothy Garton Ash

Professor Garton Ash began by emphasizing that he was neither a Farsi speaker nor an expert on Iran but mentioned that he had spent much fascinating time in Iran discussing associated issues and above all, in studying the evolution of western policy towards Iran.

Professor Garton Ash suggested that the answer to the question posed was *both* hype and possibility but said that he was struck by how small the hype from the Bush administration had been thus far. He pointed out that so far all that the US administration would officially say was that they would not take the military issue 'off the table' and that 'Iran is not Iraq'. Consequently Professor Garton Ash characterised the US approach as 'sabre tinkling' rather than 'sabre rattling' at this stage and agreed with Professor Clawson that President Bush was much less hawkish in this respect than either Senator McCain or Senator Hillary Clinton. He also ascribed their eagerness to resolve the issue in the near future to the possibility of the issue becoming more acute during 'their watch'.

Professor Garton Ash noted that despite concerns over the accuracy of intelligence resulting from past failures, the international consensus appeared to be that the Iranian nuclear programme was proceeding swiftly: the construction of a nuclear fuel cycle was underway with the potential to extend the programme into the development of nuclear armaments. The earliest assessments seem to indicate readiness in approximately five years, during the next US presidential term.

On the basis of current knowledge about Iran politics, Professor Garton Ash suggested that there was likely to be considerable domestic support to develop a nuclear fuel cycle and a nuclear programme which would ensure that they could proceed fairly quickly to the point where they could develop nuclear weapons. There was clearly no consensus about this last step but there was undoubtedly widespread popular support on the issue of the construction of a nuclear programme in Iran. The nuclear issue had met with widespread support in Iran amongst even those groups who were critical of the current government. Professor Garton Ash pointed out that the combination of military and political factors was at the heart of the matter and suggested that the trigger might be if the current Iranian regime was on the brink of developing nuclear weapons. This would represent an insupportable combination for much of the international community. The same regime without nuclear weapons would be unlikely to invite military action and, equally importantly, perhaps a different regime with nuclear weapons might be considered less of a threat and might be tolerated. In essence, Professor Clawson argued, for a number of leading neocons, the nature of the regime was just as crucial as the issue of the nuclear programme itself.

Professor Garton Ash used the analogy of two clocks, a nuclear clock and a democracy clock, to characterise the current situation in Iran. A reasonable strategic objective for Washington must be to slow down the nuclear clock and to speed up the democracy clock (not to stop the nuclear clock or start the alarm on the democracy clock!). The question was how to go about it. In Professor Garton Ash's opinion, Washington's current policy would be ineffective in both respects since the coercive diplomacy on the nuclear issue has had and will have adverse effects upon the democracy clock. Professor Garton Ash also noted that the Tehran regime's sponsoring of terrorist groups such as Hezbollah represented an additional *sine qua non* for Washington.

Professor Garton Ash noted the US's use of 'transformative diplomacy', which relied upon support for civil society and was accompanied by the rhetoric of rapid regime change – serious voices in the US had called for a 'velvet revolution' to transform the regime. Professor Garton Ash queried the likelihood of such changes but noted the importance of such rhetoric. This combination of coercive and transformative diplomacy was unlikely to achieve the required effect because the other diplomatic instruments were limited due to a number of factors: the Iranian regime was relatively well-established; Iran was oil-rich; and the importance of the roles of China and Russia in a multi-polar world. Additionally, any steps which seemed to be taken solely on the nuclear issue would risk alienating those groups currently critical of the regime and would garner further support for Ahmadinejad. The Iranian President was clearly well aware of this effect and noted the potency of Iranian nationalism. Professor Garton Ash cited a conversation he had in the Tehran Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet in which a friend commented: 'I love George Bush but I would hate him if he bombed my country!' Sanctions would similarly antagonise all sections of Iranian society.

Professor Garton Ash concurred with Professor Clawson that the situation represented a test for Europe: the EU would have to formulate viable alternative policy options if they

were critical of the US approach. Professor Garton Ash suggested that a better alternative might be one of 'constructive engagement' or 'offensive détente', noting a comparison with the Helsinki Process between western and eastern Europe which helped to bring about a peaceful end to the Cold War. Such an approach might facilitate the conditions for peaceful political change in Iran but he stressed that change could only be effected by utilising forces within the system combined with clearer incentives to the regime than are currently on offer. He argued that the problem for Europe was that the ultimate incentives could only really be offered by the US. In conclusion, Professor Garton Ash commented that an intensive strategic conversation was needed through which the EU and the US could devise a coherent policy to speed up 'the democracy clock' within the next five years.

Professor Nasser Hadian

Professor Hadian stated that the majority of Iranian domestic groups, both in government circles and beyond, did not want the bomb. He identified four different groups within Iranian society who were involved in the debate over the nuclear programme. The first group claimed that Iran does not need nuclear technology and power and that it would be too costly both in political and economic terms. This group has attracted few supporters to date. The second group claimed that Iran needs nuclear capability, power and technology and that Iran had profited from membership of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. This second group has considerable support both inside and outside the government.

The third group argues that Iran should develop nuclear weapons capabilities, but not the weapons themselves. Professor Hadian pointed out that for the first and second groups, there was no link between security and the nuclear programme but that for the third group there was a clear link between the two. The third group would argue that because in the past Iran has been the victim of chemical weapons and the international community has demonstrated itself unwilling to intervene, it is unable to rely upon the international community to defend it against such attacks. This group would then argue that it is necessary for Iran to develop weapons capability as an effective deterrent.

However this group would vehemently oppose the weaponization of Iran's nuclear programme. The argument would be that the development of actual nuclear weapons would not enhance Iranian security but would actually increase Iranian vulnerability in the region for four reasons: firstly Iran's status as a nuclear power would doubtless encourage the development of a regional arms race drawing in, for example, Kurds, Saudis, Syrians, Egyptians. Secondly, Iranian conventional superiority would be immediately lost with the development of nuclear weapons in the region. Thirdly, it would be argued that a nuclear Iran would risk pushing smaller Persian Gulf neighbours into the arms of superpowers like America. Lastly, given that the US was concerned by the possibility of terrorist groups achieving nuclear capabilities, Iran would have far greater reason for concern at infiltration by terrorist groups.

The fourth group advocated Iran's withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty on the basis that the IAEA inspectors were spies collecting intelligence from military sites and that their presence would leave Iran vulnerable to attack. Citing the comparisons of Iraq and North Korea, this group has claimed that weapons would prevent attacks upon Iran. Professor Hadian said that thankfully there was little support for the fourth group.

Of these four groups, Professor Hadian stated that groups two and three had the most support. Indeed there had been a compromise between the second and third groups: the second group would support the third if they agreed to cease at the stage of uranium

enrichment and not proceed any further towards weapons capabilities. However there was still some debate as to what level of enrichment should be reached. There was apparently some room for compromise but in return they were ready to give guarantees that they would abide by this limitation either by ratifying the additional protocols or by accepting real-time monitoring, accepting a more intrusive inspecting regime than that specified in the additional protocol. He suggested that even the range and deployment of missiles could be subject to careful negotiation. Professor Hadian argued that they were ready to give guarantees that the nuclear programme would not be diverted into nuclear weapons. This was, he claimed, exactly the position of the government at that time. According to Professor Hadian, it was crucial that western policy makers should bear this domestic debate in mind since any military action would run the risk of bringing the fourth group to power and would be likely to render their more extreme view the dominant perspective in Iran. Such action would have grave consequences, both for Iran and for the international community.

Professor Hadian turned to the issue of whether the US would take military action against Iran. He suggested that it was probably unlikely but that the possibility should not be ruled out. There were three possible scenarios: the first would involve surgical strikes; the second a comprehensive aerial bombardment of 30-60 days reducing Iran's military capabilities; the third, total war. Professor Hadian commented that the US was not currently capable of carrying out the third option, either in military, economic or political terms. In considering the first and second options, Professor Hadian noted that Iran had prepared for these eventualities and doubtless had developed contingency plans to deal with both.

Professor Hadian stressed three points in relation to the action taken by Iran: Iran would try to deal with the US and the international community diplomatically since it believed that its demands were within the rights conferred by the Non-Proliferation Treaty and therefore they did not understand why Iranian nuclear activities should cease. A double standard was perceived here: a more pertinent question might be how the US could make deals with India and Israel given that Iran was currently under pressure without even having attained enrichment level. Professor Hadian stressed that US arguments that action must be taken against Iran because of the Iranian desire for a nuclear weapon had not convinced the Iranian people not least because of the diversity of opinion on the subject domestically. He noted that this had ensured that the government had won support on the nuclear issue even from groups which opposed it on other issues.

Secondly, Professor Hadian noted that Iran had developed and strengthened its defensive capabilities and positions, both in terms of nuclear and military sites. Thirdly, Iran had developed important deterrent capabilities including significant infrastructure in a number of countries (Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, the Persian Gulf and Azerbaijan) which might be utilised in case of attack. This infrastructure has been predominantly developed for its deterrent capability, not for aggressive purposes. Professor Hadian argued that on the basis of the US's awareness of these capabilities, it seemed more likely that US military action was hype.

Although the United States might be able to initiate a conflict with Iran, they would not be able to end it: the complexities of the region would ensure that the situation escalated. Professor Hadian said that he hoped that representatives of both sides, recognising the dangers inherent in taking such action, would sit down and discuss the situation from a position of mutual respect and equality. He hoped that a compromise would be forthcoming and warned that both sides should do their utmost to ensure that they did not

test the will of the other as the consequences of such brinksmanship would be too dangerous.

Mary Riddell

Mary Riddell began by commenting that she hoped, as a journalist, to provide something of the layman's perspective on the nuclear issue. She stated that it was her impression that Iran was not 'on the radar' to the same extent as the pensions' crisis or striking dinner ladies or perhaps Iraq. She noted that Condoleezza Rice's visit to the UK the following day would see demonstrations by the Stop The War coalition. Iran did not figure so greatly and the layman's answer to the question 'hype or possibility' (but not her own), would be 'hype'. The idea of war on Iran was so far down the list of public worries that it barely registered and the layman would be horrified by the prospect of another Middle East war, another zero-sum game. However, public endorsement was evidently of critical importance in such cases, as had been made clear in the case of Iraq. Wars were embarked upon because the public failed to read the dangers of such an attack. There seemed to be little certainty that the British government would endorse a US attack but the rhetoric currently being employed certainly suggested that it was a possibility, particularly given the tenor of Tony Blair's recent speeches on world security. The UK was about to reinforce its 'vassal status' by welcoming more US nuclear weapons to replace Trident.

Mary Riddell said that she would begin with Jack Straw's response to her questions in a recent interview: 'If you're asking me whether there's going to be military action against Iran, then there won't be, in my view. Nor should there be. I can't say precisely what's going to happen.' She asked him whether that meant action was inconceivable and he said 'I think so. Yes.' Mary Riddell commented that she had taken this response to be slightly more equivocal but he went on to say, 'It's not on the agenda. I think the only people who would really like it to be on the agenda would be really hard people in Iran who would see a military threat as uniting a divided country'.

Mary Riddell said that, at that time, Mr Straw had been very hopeful about the progress of the EU 3 initiative. This had failed last January as the Americans, despite their acquiescence, had always predicted it would. Russian initiatives had similarly stalled. UN envoys, such as John Bolton, were no longer ruling out military action. These failures had led to the current development of centrifuges to enrich uranium for power stations or for warheads. Previously such technological advances had been thought to be many months away. In the same week, The Times had reported that Britain was pressing for a Chapter Seven UN resolution which would offer the option of punitive sanctions and even the use of force if Iran did not comply with demands to halt its programme. These sanctions need not necessarily be economic or military, but might rather be diplomatic – the choice would be at the discretion of the Security Council. She noted that, as of the previous day, Iran had been given a thirty day period to suspend uranium enrichment and the US would not tolerate Iran's pursuit of its current nuclear programme. With the clock ticking, the mood was hardening.

Mary Riddell asked whether this might end in attack by the US or Israel? The US would not tolerate a nuclear Iran but nor was Iran showing signs of halting its nuclear programme. Iran clearly had intentions of becoming an even stronger force in the region: while the US had hoped to neutralise Iran as a power in Iraq but had rather seen Iran emerge as a *de facto* victor in regional terms. This combined with Hamas' recent victory in the Palestinian elections signified a new phase of Iranian influence in the Middle East.

The US faced regional marginalisation, increasingly being forced to settle for 'pygmy status' whilst watching the worrying developments in the Iranian regime's foreign policy.

Why was the current situation in Iran so alarming? There were a number of factors which were causes for concern because jointly, they closely resembled the build-up to the Iraq war: the intervention of independent inspectors; talk of Security Council Sanctions (with attendant problems of Chinese/Russian intervention); the threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction; the inequality of the US application of the NPT given Bush's promises to India, a non-signatory; the claim that 'time is running out'; the characterisation of certain domestic groups as young and westernised (comparable to the characterisation of Iraqi opposition groups); a preoccupation with fighting the spectre of terror (with no mention of the fact that it may be exacerbated by invasion/intervention as the current situation of the insurgency in Iraq has demonstrated); finally the use of the 'rhetoric of righteousness' e.g. that even Iraq will turn out to be a success if only it is given time. Such claims appeared to be a true reflection of leaders' beliefs, not merely an attempt to pacify their parties and domestic opposition. If western intervention in Iraq should appear to be vindicated, the US would be at liberty to move on to Iran.

Mary Riddell added that she was tired of the *mea culpa* attitude of neocons and columnists such as Francis Fukuyama who had recently spent their days 'unfighting' the Iraq war and paying little heed to the impending crisis in Iran. She noted that, whilst reason and logic suggested that military action in Iran should not be an option, as anyone living today in Baghdad would be able to testify, such contra-indicators offer no impediment to an attack.

Questions from the audience

Khalid Nadeem, South Asia and Middle East Forum

Mr Nadeem said that one thing struck him as offering some little hope: he noted the high calibre of Iran diplomats and suggested that they were amongst the best in the Middle East. He noted their patience and reason, and suggested that Iranian diplomats should be brought to the negotiating table along with representatives from China, Russia, the US and the EU. He suggested that, following a period which he characterised as dominated by political posturing for the benefit of the electorate, there might be considerable advantage in taking some time to 'cool off' and engage in some considered diplomacy.

Elizabeth Kennet

Elizabeth Kennet asked three questions: firstly, she addressed Professor Clawson and asked why President Bush took such great exception to Iran having a minimum deterrent. Secondly, she addressed Professor Hadian and raised the issue of the western response to the 'maritime war-games' scheduled by the Iranian regime for the next week: what was this likely to be? Thirdly, she pointed out that Iranian diplomats have said that there would be little chance of peace in the Middle East until the so-called 'zionist' nuclear weapons are taken into consideration by the west. Why, she asked, was this not being taken into account by western commentators?

Professor Clawson

Professor Clawson replied that although he concurred with the questioner's assessment of the high calibre of Iranian diplomats, in reality they had little influence over their country's foreign policy agenda. When recently in Tokyo, Professor Clawson had spoken with Japanese experts on Iran who had concluded that, in their analysis, the Iranian Foreign Minister was the eighth most important person in Iran in terms of determining

Iranian foreign policy: Professor Clawson had expressed surprise that the Foreign Minister should rank so highly. When a deal was struck with the three European foreign ministers who visited Iran, the Iranian Foreign Minister was not even allowed in the room. The Supreme Leader remains the key figure in the decision-making process whilst diplomats are essentially required to present a 'smiling and sweet face' to foreigners.

In answer to the question as to whether the international community should not stand back and 'cool off' for a moment, Professor Clawson stated that they could not afford to because Iran was not standing back but rather proceeding at a considerable pace. In answer to the question as to why President Bush opposed the idea of Iran having a minimum deterrent, Professor Clawson pointed out that, although it has been argued that countries which obtain nuclear weapons may become more responsible international actors (due to the weight of responsibility associated with the possession of weapons), and therefore proliferation should not be of concern, this was not substantiated by its application even to one state. In reality the threat is far greater since one weapon has the potential to kill one million people. Professor Clawson reiterated that nuclear proliferation was a very serious issue and that the NPT represented a very considerable effort by the international community to limit proliferation and to bring nuclear development within the obligations of the treaty. He stressed that efforts were being made to address the issue of countries that remained outside the NPT and that signatories were concerned that the NPT should remain in force and assist in reducing the number of weapons worldwide.

Professor Hadian

Professor Hadian commented although he fully agreed with Professor Clawson that the ultimate objective should be the eradication of all nuclear weapons, he called for pressure to be placed upon Israel to join in the process of détente and for control of their nuclear programme, arguing that there should be one common standard for the international community. Although Iranian Supreme Leader played a key role in the decision-making process, the President also retained considerable influence. He also argued that Iranian diplomats had considerable say in so far as their skills and expertise contributed to the decision-making process.

In answer to the question as to the objective of the impending Iranian war games, Professor Hadian commented that as is often the case, the implied objective was likely to differ from the stated objective: the implication, he suggested, was to demonstrate capabilities and readiness to the target audience. Professor Hadian pointed out that Israeli disarmament would be greatly to the advantage of those furthering the cause of détente and the eradication of WMDs in the Middle East, but said that he did not see Israeli disarmament as the *sine qua non* for peace in the Middle East.

Mary Riddell

Mary Riddell commented that the last conference on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (held in New York) had failed, taking one week *not* to agree an agenda. She noted that it would be very difficult indeed to make a serious case for portraying the US as a leader of disarmament given its role in commissioning Trident, its own weapons, its hypocritical negotiations on the nuclear issue with India and its attitude towards North Korea's weapons programme. She suggested that, in this respect, the US risked suffering the consequences of its ambivalent stance on the nuclear issue. Mary Riddell argued that the reason why it would be impossible for Iran to pursue a nuclear programme was simply because the US would refuse to accept it doing so. She argued that it seemed as if any country but Iran would be able to pursue enrichment 'right up to the wire' in a peaceful

programme under the terms of NPT and then to resign in order to build weapons. She argued that these were the sort of issues that deserved attention.

Professor Clawson

Professor Clawson argued that only one country had lied to the international community for eighteen years. That country was Iran. As a result, Iran would have to forfeit some of the rights accorded to other countries under the NPT in return for openness and transparency concerning its nuclear programme. Israel had not signed the non-proliferation treaty and as a result it was not bound by the terms of the treaty but neither had it received the benefits that the NPT signatories had been rewarded with. Professor Clawson suggested that those who respected international law should respect its application in this context: Iran, as a signatory, had received such benefits including technological assistance but did not wish to abide by the obligations imposed as a result. The Israeli government, Professor Clawson noted, had said that it looked forward to signing the treaty when the Middle East was a zone of peace and mutual trust. It would not sign the treaty whilst other regional powers were still threatening its existence. If Iran was interested in Israel signing the NPT, the Iranian ambassador in Jerusalem should raise this with the Israeli government. Professor Clawson argued that it was within Iran's power to bring Israel into the NPT and Iran was not taking the appropriate action.

Unidentified Speaker

The speaker pointed out that even before the Islamic Republic of Iran came into existence, Israel had had the nuclear bomb.

Professor Clawson

Professor Clawson argued that this was because Israel did not have peace with its Arab neighbours at that time but that Israel did now have peace with its Arab neighbours. Furthermore Professor Clawson argued that even if other signatories were to violate the terms of the agreement, there was no justification for letting another country get away with it. He reiterated that Iran had a legal obligation under the NPT which had to be fulfilled regardless of other states' activities. He stressed that no associated benefits had been accrued by Israel since the treaty was negotiated. Israel had already possessed the weapon and accrued the necessary technology prior to this and had gained nothing from the other signatories of the NPT since.

Mamdouh Salameh

Iran was four times the size of Iraq and had three times the population. Iran would stir up insurgency amongst its Shi'a allies in Iraq and in the oil provinces of Saudi Arabia. Given the nature of the situation in Iraq, there was the potential for 'hell in Iran'. If challenged, Iran had the potential to strike at oil installations and to close the Straits of Hormuz, provoking a considerable oil crisis. Iran would be in a 'win-win' situation.

Professor Clawson

Professor Clawson challenged the analysis that Iran was too powerful to stop on the basis that the US was prepared to go to war with Russia. If Iran was unstoppable, he argued, surely the argument would be to stop it now? However, Professor Clawson argued that Iran didn't have such capabilities: it would not be able to mobilize the Shi'a community in Iraq since they were engaged in dealing with the insurgency. Professor Clawson asked why Iraqi Shi'a would want to attack the US since it was assisting them in dealing with the Sunni insurgents.

Professor Garton Ash

The defence of the Israeli position on this nuclear issue offered by Professor Clawson was 'almost hilariously implausible'. Iran poses a particularly grave threat due to the nature of the revolutionary, radical Islamist regime itself: complex, polyarchic and fragmented. Furthermore the Revolutionary Guards were particularly adept at playing cross-border games. Iran would pose a graver threat than Russia had done if endowed with nuclear weapons because it had developed unusual capabilities in response to the asymmetric nature of modern warfare and this asymmetry was particularly pronounced within the immediate regional context of the Middle East. Iran's sphere of influence extended into Lebanon and Afghanistan as well as southern Iraq.

Professor Hadian

Nuclear weapons would not be a good thing for Iran. He held this opinion not just because of Israel but because the possession of nuclear bombs would not only fail to improve regional security but would actually be to its detriment. However, Professor Hadian argued against the double standard that he perceived to be at work, arguing that if nuclear weapons represented a danger in one case for one state, they should be considered as such across the board.

David Suratgar

Mr Suratgar commented that the US should see reason: he pointed out that the NPT was founded on certain principles including the fact that countries' weapons should not threaten those who did not have them. President Bush, during his State of the Union Address, had explicitly referred to seeking regime change in Iran. In the 1930s, whilst the Shah's father was making movements against British oil concessions in Iran, Harold Nicholson had commented that Iran was a 'historic culture' but that every hundred years or so, they 'went crazy'. He suggested that rather than beating them, they should be put into a padded cell, allowed to quieten down and would emerge calm and collected. Mr Suratgar suggested that unwise handling of the current situation would only exacerbate the situation.

Patrick Clawson

Professor Clawson noted that the European Union was currently in charge of the negotiations with Iran and that the IAEA was responsible for the use of force to enforce diplomacy. Regarding Israel, he noted that the US position on Israel was also the position of the European Union and United Kingdom since the signing of the NPT. He suggested that such questions ought also to be addressed to the governments of the EU since they shared the US administration's views on this subject.

Mary Riddell

Mary Riddell asked whether it was true that the European Union was in charge of the situation as Professor Clawson had suggested. She conceded that the EU troika had bought some time but pointed out that there was no guarantee that there would be a successful outcome to negotiations.

Nasenin Ansari, Voice of America (Persian Service) and Kayhan (London)

A recent study by Tehran University into the Bushehr plant had not been made public by the Iranian government and newspapers in Iran had recently banned inflammatory or dissident headlines on the subject of the nuclear programme. The importance of environmental issues associated with the Iranian nuclear programme should also be appreciated. She noted that whilst there had been a recent tendency to blame Israel and India, there was in fact one crucial difference between these countries and Iran: democracy – Iran treats even its own people badly.

Patrick Clawson

Professor Clawson suggested that President Bush seemed prepared to explore the possibility of developing multilateral consensus on the issue of Iran but the extension of such an approach to other areas would depend upon the success of its application to the Iranian situation. He suggested that the Iranian nuclear issue would provide a useful test case: Europe occupied a key position in the situation and enjoyed considerable responsibility. Professor Clawson suggested that it was up to London to direct the action.

Timothy Garton Ash

Professor Garton Ash commented that he agreed with Professor Clawson in this respect since he was increasingly irritated by the British and EU complaining about American policy without managing to suggest a preferable option. Since the US had no diplomatic relations with Tehran, he suggested that there were excellent opportunities for European diplomats in Tehran to develop a coherent and consistent policy in Iran. At present, he noted that the EU did not have a policy on Iran but was rather extemporising from the position of the EU 3 on the nuclear issue. Professor Garton Ash suggested that the European Union has traditionally achieved little in the sphere of foreign policy because of a failure to sit down and establish a consistent EU position on certain key issues. He suggested that the time had come to sit down and thrash out a more coherent policy towards Iran including such measures as human contacts, cultural exchanges, trade links and the effective use of diplomats.

Professor Hadian

Professor Hadian wanted to end on a relatively optimistic note: Iran was to accept the offer of talks with the United States on the subject of their relationship concerning Iraq. He commented that it was privately hoped that such talks would lead to improved relations and noted that the US Ambassador in Iraq was widely respected as a skilful diplomat. Professor Hadian commented that he was hopeful of ways to improve relations and that such advances could only be positive for the wider community.