

## DOTS OVER "I"'S

It's high time we all put dots over this "i" over the Iranian "i." The *ship* of the Iranian nuclear program has been covered by such a thick layer of discussion *sea shells* in recent years that the picture is simply distorted.

What would be the natural behavior of the country, which in the 1980s suffered from an aggressive neighbor who employed chemical weapons, while the international community kept silence?

What would be the natural behavior of the country that is publicly accused of being part of the *axis of evil* and witnessing the attacks and destruction of another member of the same alleged *axis*?

What do you think should be the course of the country that often hears the out-loud debate about air strikes against it? What should it do when it listens to the talk about overthrowing the *repressive regime*, while the societies in Saudi Arabia or Egypt are hardly more open or freer? However, they are more obedient than Iran and, hence, receive carrots rather than sticks.

One does not need profound expertise to understand—the country will do its best to ensure its national security by all means. And it will undertake such efforts covertly, without resting its hopes on anyone else and without taking into account anyone else's opinion.

This was the factor underlying Iran's strategy in the mid-1980s, when this nation began to consider the possibility of developing an indigenous nuclear weapons program.

Was there a chance to turn back Iran from this dangerous path? Yes, there were many opportunities. In 2003 Iran was ready and, moreover, seriously convinced (without deception) of the need to curb its military plans in exchange for a broad package of economic incentives and security assurances. However, the United States was not ready for such turn of events at that time. The talks were long, but the deal was not struck. And the very idea of negotiations with Iran was discredited then, and not by Tehran after all.

Then a new, protracted story began—as to whether or not Iran was allowed to enrich uranium. The Security Council resolutions followed one after another, but they were no more than pieces of paper, a moment of therapy for those who were writing them . . . This story was not constructive either, since Iran learned to enrich uranium, does enrich it and will continue to do so. It is impossible to bottle the jinn. The chickens come home to roost—a bad beginning makes a bad ending.

Roger Cohen in his brilliant article in *The New York Times* analyzes the Iranian proposals and concludes:

I cannot see any deal that will not at some point trade controlled Iranian enrichment on its soil against insistence that Iran accept the vigorous inspections of the IAEA Additional Protocol and a 24/7 IAEA presence. The time is approaching for the United States and its allies to abandon "zero enrichment" as a goal—it's no longer feasible—and concentrate on how to exclude weaponization, cap enrichment and ensure Iran believes the price for breaking any accord will be heavy.<sup>1</sup>

I agree. In our negotiations with Iran we rolled back to 2003. But one should learn from one's own mistakes and not miss the chance to reach a large-scale agreement with Iran today.





In this respect, the outcome of the negotiations between Tehran and *The Six* I regard as a sign of hope. The United States is following the right course and has started a direct bilateral dialogue over lunch with Iran, as well as participating actively in joint talks.

The process will be long—Iran was under stress and now needs certain compensations.

Nonetheless, unless Iran takes a political decision to acquire its own nuclear weapons, we still have a chance for an agreement—lifting the economic sanctions, un-freezing the Iranian assets in U.S. banks, providing fully fledged normalization of U.S.–Iranian relations, granting security assurances to Iran stipulated by unprecedented transparency for IAEA inspections, which should penetrate beyond the scope of the Additional Protocol (which Iran should ratify and make effective), or even through Tehran's consent to special international inspections. After a while, if such inspections indicate the lack of evidence of a nuclear weapons program, the Iranian dossier in Vienna should be closed and Tehran should be involved in international nuclear energy cooperation.

Another important factor that may hamper these plans is Israel. Or, let's put it more correctly, unpredictable Israel under the Netanyahu regime.

One cannot rule out the option of an Israeli attack against Iran. What will it mean? "This is the worst thing that can be imagined," says President Dmitry Medvedev in his interview with Fareed Zakaria. "What will happen after that? Humanitarian disaster, a vast number of refugees, Iran's wish to take revenge and not only upon Israel, to be honest, but upon other countries as well. And absolutely unpredictable development of the situation in the region. I believe that the magnitude of this disaster can be weighed against almost nothing . . . . It would be the most unreasonable development. But my Israeli colleagues told me that they were not planning to act in this way and I trust them."<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Dmitry Medvedev, I don't trust Netanyahu. I had a chance to meet him when he was the Prime Minister and he made the impression of a superficial, very emotional politician. Without getting to the substance of matters that we discussed (and it was Iran, as you may guess), he was staring at my tie that was covered with a lot of nice camels. "Is it a gift from Primakov?," he asked. I thought that if I hadn't worn a tie, he would have taken me for an Iranian agent of influence.

Iran does not need to be protected (even though the deployment of the S-300 missile system would be a reasonable move in order to prevent other countries from the temptation to fly over its territory and nuclear facilities). Tehran is capable of defending itself. But should it be provoked to apply such defense?

"No nuclear endgame that fails to address Iran's victim syndrome through some degree of highly monitored empowerment is conceivable to me . . . . In the end, talks are essential because there is no viable alternative,"<sup>3</sup> writes Roger Cohen.

Of course, there is no alternative to negotiations. And if there were, it would be deplorable—it would mean war, destruction, international instability, or Iran possessing nuclear weapons. There is still a chance to avoid any of those scenarios.

However, when we put the dots over Iranian "i's, isn't it high time we did the same with Israel?


Iran's aggressive statements against Israel are designated for internal use, mostly for internal Muslim use. There is no serious aggressive strategy behind this rhetoric. If the external pressure on Iran becomes weaker, such rhetoric will die as well.

What is more important is that Israel keeps neglecting the appeals of the international community to eliminate (or at least, to declare first) its nuclear arsenal. The 1995 NPT Review Conference decision on the Middle East contains a direct demand for Israel to do so. Now, on the eve of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, the Israeli position multiplied by the inaction of major sponsors of the 1995 package decision is a time bomb for the talks in New York in May 2010. The key stumbling block will not be the disarmament process—it will be the Middle East and the lack of progress on the 1995 resolution.

The new U.S. administration is following the right path here as well. At the recent PrepCom in Geneva, head of the U.S. delegation Rose Gottemoeller finished delivering the Obama address to the meeting and directly appealed to Israel (and other parties not covered by the NPT) to join the treaty. Iran was not mentioned even once in this speech.



Nowadays this movement in the right direction needs practical support. In order to keep moving, the U.S. administration will have to demonstrate the miracle of diplomatic maneuvering and sustain the pressure of those who prefer tough action to holding talks with Iran and displaying patience. Washington will require wit and calmness.

And here Russia should help the United States. Under such circumstances we can and should work together with Washington on Iran and on the Middle East. 

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Roger Cohen, "How to Talk to Iran," *New York Times*, September 16, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/17/opinion/17iht-edcohen.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/17/opinion/17iht-edcohen.html?_r=1) (last accessed October 6, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Interview with the President of the Russian Federation to CNN, recorded on September 15, 2009 and posted on September 20, 2009 <<http://www.kremlin.ru/news/5516>>, (last accessed October 9, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Roger Cohen, "How to Talk to Iran ..."



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