

For Inquiring Minds – 24 February 2012

Iran Is Ready to Talk

By DENNIS B. ROSS - *The New York Times* – 15 February 2012

1 **SPECULATION** about an Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities is
2 **rife, but there is little discussion about whether diplomacy can still succeed,**
3 **precluding the need for military action.**

4 **Many experts doubt that Tehran would ever accept a deal that uses intrusive**
5 **inspections and denies or limits uranium enrichment to halt any advances**
6 **toward a nuclear weapons capability, while still permitting the development of**
7 **civilian nuclear power. But before we assume that diplomacy can't work, it is**
8 **worth considering that Iranians are now facing crippling pressure and that**
9 **their leaders have in the past altered their behavior in response to such**
10 **pressure. Notwithstanding all their bluster, there are signs that Tehran is now**
11 **looking for a way out.**

12 **Much has changed in the last three years. In January 2009, Iran was**
13 **spreading its influence throughout the Middle East, and Arab leaders were**
14 **reluctant to criticize Iran in public lest they trigger a coercive Iranian**
15 **reaction. Similarly, Iran's government wasn't facing significant economic**
16 **pressures; Iranians had simply adjusted to the incremental sanctions they**
17 **were then facing.**

18 **Today, Iran is more isolated than ever. The regional balance of power is**
19 **shifting against Tehran, in no small part because of its ongoing support for**
20 **the beleaguered government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. The Assad regime is**
21 **failing, and in time, Iran will lose its only state ally in the Arab world and its**
22 **conduit for arming the militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon.**

23 **Iran's Arab neighbors in the Persian Gulf, and even the United Nations**
24 **General Assembly, no longer hesitate to criticize Tehran. Gone is the fear of**
25 **Iranian intimidation, as the Saudis demonstrated by immediately promising**
26 **to fill the gap and meet Europe's needs when the European Union announced**
27 **its decision to boycott the purchase of Iran's oil. Even after Iran denounced**
28 **the Saudi move as a hostile act, the Saudis did not back off.**

29 **Iran cannot do business with or obtain credit from any reputable**
30 **international bank, nor can it easily insure its ships or find energy investors.**
31 **According to Iran’s oil ministry, the energy sector needs more than \$100**
32 **billion in investments to revitalize its aging infrastructure; it now faces a**
33 **severe shortfall.**

34 **New American penalties on Iran’s central bank and those doing business with**
35 **it have helped trigger an enormous currency devaluation. In the last six**
36 **weeks, the Iranian rial has declined dramatically against the dollar, adding to**
37 **the economic woes Iran is now confronting.**

38 **Grain is sitting on ships that won’t unload their cargoes in Iranian ports**
39 **because suppliers haven’t been paid; Iranian oil is being stored on tankers as**
40 **Iran’s buyers demand discounts to purchase it; and even those countries that**
41 **continue to do business with Iran are not paying in dollars. India plans to buy**
42 **45 percent of its oil from Iran using rupees, meaning that Iran will be forced**
43 **to buy Indian goods that it may not want or need.**

44 **The Obama administration initially sought genuine engagement with Iran,**
45 **but it understood that if Iran’s leaders rebuffed such efforts, America would**
46 **have to apply unprecedented pressure to halt Tehran’s nuclear ambitions.**

47 **Beginning in 2010, Washington worked methodically to impose political,**
48 **diplomatic, economic and security pressure, making clear that the cost of**
49 **noncompliance would continue to rise while still leaving the Iranians a way**
50 **out. This strategy took into account how Iranian leaders had adjusted their**
51 **behavior in the past to escape major pressure — from ending the war with**
52 **Iraq in 1988 to stopping the assassinations of Iranian dissidents in Europe in**
53 **the 1990s to suspending uranium enrichment in 2003.**

54 **The Obama administration has now created a situation in which diplomacy**
55 **has a chance to succeed. It remains an open question whether it will.**

56 **Israel worries that it could lose its military option, and it may be reluctant to**
57 **wait for diplomacy to bear fruit. That said, Israeli leaders, including Prime**
58 **Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have consistently called for “crippling**
59 **sanctions,” reflecting a belief that Iran’s behavior could be changed with**
60 **sufficient pressure. The fact that crippling sanctions have finally been applied**
61 **means that Israel is more likely to give these sanctions and the related**
62 **diplomatic offensive a chance to work. And it should.**

63 **Still, it is unclear whether Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei,**
64 **whose regime depends so heavily on hostility to America, is willing to make a**
65 **deal on the nuclear issue. Nonetheless, Iran is now signaling that it is**
66 **interested in diplomacy. Its foreign minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, has declared**
67 **that Iran will resume talks with the five permanent members of the Security**
68 **Council and the Germans. He recently said that Iran would discuss Russia's**
69 **step-by-step proposal to defuse the nuclear standoff, which Iran refused to**
70 **entertain when a variation of it was first broached last year.**

71 **Now, with Iran feeling the pressure, its leaders suddenly seem prepared to**
72 **talk. Of course, Iran's government might try to draw out talks while pursuing**
73 **their nuclear program. But if that is their strategy, they will face even more**
74 **onerous pressures, when a planned European boycott of their oil begins on**
75 **July 1.**

76 **Moreover, given Mr. Obama's stated determination to prevent Iran from**
77 **acquiring nuclear weapons, Iran's leaders may actually be making the use of**
78 **force against their nuclear facilities more likely by playing for time.**

79 **Iran can have civilian nuclear power, but it must not have nuclear weapons.**
80 **Ultimately, Ayatollah Khamenei will have to decide what poses a greater**
81 **threat to his rule: ending his quest for nuclear weapons or stubbornly**
82 **pursuing them as crippling economic pressures mount.**

83 **With Iran reeling from sanctions, the proper environment now exists for**
84 **diplomacy to work. The next few months will determine whether it succeeds.**

85 *Dennis B. Ross, a former State Department and National Security Council official, was a*
86 *special assistant to President Obama for the Middle East, Afghanistan and South Asia from*
87 *2009 to 2011. He is now a counselor at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.*