

# Common sense on Iran

By Barry Blechman, The Stimson Center - 07/14/11 01:40 PM ET

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I recently visited 12 American cities — from Anchorage to Colorado Springs to Charleston — to discuss Iran and the effort to stop its nuclear weapons program. I may not have drawn crowds as large as Lady Gaga's, but I did engage thousands of citizens directly or through local media. It was refreshing to be able to discuss the issue free from the political implications that color similar Washington conversations. Americans, I discovered, have a lot more common sense about our options than many Washington politicians.

In a February 2011 Gallup poll, 25 percent of the respondents named Iran spontaneously as “the United States' greatest enemy today” — more than any other state. Americans also believe overwhelmingly that Iran is seeking to acquire nuclear weapons; indeed, many Americans believe Tehran already has them. This is not surprising, given that officials have been predicting an imminent Iranian bomb ever since Israel's then-foreign minister Shimon Peres warned in 1992 that Iran, “would be armed with a nuclear bomb by 1999.” It was reassuring to my audiences to learn that the US and Israeli governments now agree that Iran is unlikely to have a weapon before 2015.

When given a choice of policy options to deal with Iran, about 20 percent of Americans choose military intervention while, typically, 50 percent or more prefer economic sanctions or diplomacy, or a combination of the two. These figures, which have been fairly consistent for the past five years, fit well with my conversations.

The need to end Iran's nuclear program through preemptive air strikes may be a crowd-pleasing line for some politicians, but even a couple of minutes spent contemplating the level of force required and the likely consequences left my audiences shaking their heads in opposition. Most experts believe that any attempt to destroy Iran's nuclear infrastructure would also have to destroy as much of Iran's armed forces as possible, so as to reduce the expected retaliation. Even then, Iran would have no shortage of ways to strike back. My audiences, particularly those with some military experience, had little enthusiasm for policy options that would risk US involvement in yet another war in the Middle East.

The Americans I spoke with overwhelmingly preferred economic sanctions. They see them as punishing Iran for its intransigence and subterfuges, but without the risks suggested by military operations. Some would like to see the sanctions tightened, reflecting only limited knowledge about the effects of the existing ones.

For example, few knew that all the Western oil companies and most financial institutions have pulled out of Iran, leaving Tehran's plans to develop the country's oil and gas resources in shambles. Iran's bleak economic future under sanctions is one reason for the internal conflict we are now witnessing among Iran's elites — with some parties pressing for measures to end the country's growing isolation.

Sabotage and other covert operations are also popular options with Americans, triggering

Hollywood-inspired images of omnipotent, black-suited security agents. The damage imposed by the Stuxnet worm inspired particular admiration, as did the introduction of defective materials through Iran's dealings in the black market. My audiences were less enthusiastic about the assassination of scientists — a third dirty trick that seems to have been played by some nation's clandestine service.

My audiences also were skeptical about prospects for a diplomatic solution that satisfied international concerns that Iran's nuclear activities were not masking a capability to rapidly arm itself and that Iran's demand to develop nuclear power for peaceful purposes, as is its right under the Nonproliferation Treaty, would not be abused.

I believe and argued that such an agreement can be described, and might be negotiable if political circumstances align in Washington and Tehran, but my audiences were largely unconvinced. In part, this lack of faith in diplomacy represents distrust of the Iranians. In greater part, though, skepticism about the possibility of a negotiated solution reflects fatalism about nuclear proliferation generally, and about Iran's program in particular.

So, if Americans rule out a new war in the Middle East, but rate the odds of stopping Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons through sanctions/covert ops/diplomacy as long, where does that leave us?

It is still possible that Iran will decide to stop short of a weapons capability and provide reassurances to the international community in order to end its political isolation and restart its economic development. The outcome of this internal and escalating political conflict among Iran's elites will determine whether this possibility becomes reality. Key to such an outcome is our recognition of Iran's right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, including the enrichment of uranium.

Unfortunately, in the short-term, a diplomatic solution is unlikely due to the politics in Washington and in Tehran. Compromise is currently considered political suicide in both capitals. As demonstrated by the Iranian Green Movement in 2009, however, and more recently in so many other countries in the region, it is evident that the democratic values championed by Americans are shared by tens of millions throughout the Middle East. In the long-term, this shared desire for personal freedoms, responsive governments, and individual opportunity offers the greatest hope for the healing of past scars and the eventual peaceful resolution of the real differences between us.

*Barry Blechman is a distinguished fellow at the Stimson Center, a non-partisan research center in Washington.*