

The Debate We Want to Hear & What They Really Said

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Articles & Testimony

On Friday, September 26, The Washington Post asked various foreign affairs analysts and other experts for their evaluation of what the two presidential candidates should discuss in their first televised debate, which took place that evening. Afterward, the Post asked those analysts to share their assessments of the debate. The Washington Institute's Patrick Clawson, deputy director for research, and David Makovsky, director of the Institute's Project on the Middle East Peace Process, participated in this forum. We present their contributions below.

PATRICK CLAWSON

Pre-Debate. Russia and China are on a different page from us about Iran (and are not that well disposed toward us in general). For all the fine words from our European allies, they have done little to step up the pressure on Iran outside the U.N. framework. The only way to get help from Europe and Russia may be to put Iran at the top of our agenda. Is Iran that important? Put another way: How important is the risk that an Iranian nuclear breakout will lead to many more nuclear states, not least in the Middle East?

Should the United States state clearly that if necessary it will use force to preempt Iran from getting nuclear weapons, or is deterrence a better policy than preemption?

What are U.S. priorities with Russia? Should we be willing to accommodate Moscow on issues like Georgia if the Kremlin agrees to be helpful on issues such as Iran?

How can we structure talks with Iran in such a way as to serve U.S. interests, rather than strengthening the hard-line regime?

Post-Debate. The candidates emphasized their differences on Iran when actually they have much in common. Both agreed "we cannot tolerate a nuclear Iran." Both supported reinforced diplomacy as the solution, with strengthened sanctions as the central instrument.

Even regarding the issue on which they exchanged testy words namely, engaging Iran their differences were more about how to engage rather than whether to talk. For all his pounding McCain about direct talks, Obama agreed that meetings required preparation and would not start with a presidential summit. And for all his hammering Obama about meeting Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad without preconditions, McCain agreed that Iran and the United States should be talking even while profound differences are unresolved.

Each made the same goof, mistaking Iran's Revolutionary Guards for Saddam's Republican Guards. More important, though, each ignored the fact that the policies they propose offer poor prospects of success. Only the true optimists, like me, still believe that sanctions and engagement can persuade Iran to postpone its nuclear ambitions, much less to abandon them. More likely, the day will come when a president will have to decide just how unacceptable is a nuclear Iran: is preemption the wiser option, or deterrence? For all the tough words, neither candidate even hinted that force was an option on the table. Until we convince Iran's leaders that America will act if need be, they will continue to believe that we will eventually tolerate the nuclear Iran we now declare to be unacceptable. That gives them little reason to change course.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

Pre-Debate. Israeli and Palestinian leaders have spent more time discussing the final contours of a peace plan since last November's Annapolis conference than ever before. Key territorial differences have been narrowed. Yet important gaps remain. How high of a priority is it to keep Annapolis alive? Is there a better approach? How could the United States persuade the Israeli and Palestinian publics not to be deterred by past setbacks and to believe again that diplomacy can produce results?

More broadly, how should the United States reach out to Arab states to support peace? The Arab states usually say that they endorsed an Arab initiative in 2002 that offers Israel diplomatic recognition once Israel yields all the territories it won in the 1967 war; many Israelis insist that is insufficient, as they are more vulnerable to rocket fire having already withdrawn from Gaza and Lebanon. How can we approach the Arab states to use their unique position to delegitimize the radicals who seek to torpedo peace?

Some say the Bush effort on Middle East democratization was futile because elections only bring into office Islamists who are hostile to the United States. Others say that the program should not be shelved but, perhaps, modified to focus more on establishing the foundation of liberal institutions. What's the best way to proceed?

Post-Debate. Both made clear that the United States could not tolerate a nuclear Iran. Both made clear that Iran was a rogue state, yet both said they would engage Tehran. (McCain on talks with Iran: "there could be secretary-level and lower level meetings. I've always encouraged them.") This is at odds with the policy that characterized much of the Bush administration.

With Obama seemingly backing off his interest in meeting with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ("Ahmadinejad is not the most powerful person in Iran. So he may not be the right person to talk to"), this focus on engagement requires clarification by both candidates before Election Day. What leverage would the United States bring to the table to secure American interests? Both candidates mentioned prospects of heightened sanctions -- what would those be? Halting imports on refined gasoline to Iran, which is dependent on the world for more than 40 percent of its needs? What would be the relationship between sanctions and engagement? What would be the timetable for such engagement? In other words, how does one structure engagement so it would not be like a basketball game where Tehran plays out the clock until it possesses nuclear weapons?

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