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Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S., and the Twisted Path to Confrontation

Patricia Ellis: Good evening everyone, and welcome. We're so pleased that our members, guests, and friends could join us tonight. This is our third Authors Series event this fall. It's one of our favorite series, and obviously, judging by all the people here, there is great interest in hearing our speaker tonight. She's Barbara Slavin, Senior Diplomatic correspondent for *USA Today*, who is currently on leave as a Senior Fellow at the U.S. Institute for Peace. She's working on a very exciting project there called "Iran Rising: Iran and Its Clients in the Middle East" and she's looking at Iran's regional influence on three conflicts: Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. Tonight she is here to discuss and sign her new book, so I hope everyone has had a chance to pick one up. The name of her book is *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S., and the Twisted Path to Confrontation*. This event couldn't be more timely; it's one of those issues where something is always happening. Of course, last week, there were new sanctions; today there was a surprise visit by the Russian Foreign Minister to Iran to discuss Iran's nuclear aspirations, and he came out and said that he opposes the sanctions. So there's a lot going on. It even has made its way into the Presidential campaigns. There's another debate tonight, so it will be interesting to see if it will be raised.

For those of you who don't know me, I am Patricia Ellis, President of the Women's Foreign Policy Group. What we're all about is promoting global engagement, women's voices, and women's leadership. Before I open the program, I would like to recognize two Board members who are here, Gail Kitch and Donna Constantinople. Thank you so much for coming. I would also like to recognize the Ambassador of Iceland and his wife, who just a couple of weeks ago hosted an absolutely beautiful event at their residence with the Foreign Minister of Iceland. I also want to recognize one of our good friends, the Ambassador of Liechtenstein. We work very closely with the women ambassadors in Washington, so we're really pleased about their participation in our event. We also have representatives from other embassies, including Norway and France.

I also wanted to remind everyone about one exciting event that we have coming up in December. Secretary Rice will be the keynote speaker, the second female Secretary of State we have hosted. Our first annual luncheon celebrated the first one, Secretary Albright. We hope everyone will be able to join us. It will be a very special event.

Let me tell you a little bit about Barbara. At *USA Today*, she was the Senior Diplomatic Correspondent, so she covered foreign news, foreign policy, with a lot of focus on the war on terrorism in Iraq, policy toward rogue states, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. She was the first reporter to interview the Iranian President, Ahmadinejad. I'm sure a lot of you have seen her regularly on NPR, PBS, and C-SPAN. Prior to joining *USA Today*, she was a Washington-based reporter for *The Economist* and the LA Times. During that time she covered the many peace talks in the 1990s. She served as *The Economist* correspondent in Cairo and worked for *The New York Times* and UPI. She wrote the book that she is about to speak about while she was a Public Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
Please join me in welcoming Barbara Slavin.

Barbara Slavin: This is still an unexpected position. I expect to be down there, raising my hand and asking impertinent questions of government officials, which is my favorite thing. I have to thank President Bush for his comments about World War III; they have improved my sales enormously. One would almost think he's my PR agent, bus alas, alack, he's not.

I want to thank Patricia Ellis for contacting me very early on as soon as she found out I was writing this book she expressed an interest in having me come and speak. I'm very grateful. As many of you in this room know, it's quite a juggling act, managing a day job, a family, and also trying to write a book. But this book, which is my first, was something that I absolutely had to write; it just poured out of me. It was spring of 2006 and I had just come back from an extraordinary trip to Iran, my sixth trip to Iran, and I heard the Bush Administration beginning to build the same case against Iran that it did against Iraq. My antenna went up and I thought, wait a minute. I thought it would be important to at least try to explain the country to Americans, and look at the diplomacy of the last few years and see where we've gone wrong and where we could have gone right.

I don't want to talk too long because I'm interested in your questions, but I thought I'd just say a little bit about how I got interested in Iran, a couple people asked me about this. I was actually a Soviet major in college and lived in the old Soviet Union. When I became a reporter, many years ago, I didn't want to be pigeon-holed as one of those women who only write about women's issues, so I kind of avoided those types of topics. But when I joined *USA Today* in 1996, the Taliban had just consolidated power in Afghanistan and were distinguishing themselves by, among other things, their atrocious treatment of women. I had an editor at that time who suggested—since she knew I'd lived in Cairo and had traveled a lot in the Muslim world—that I do a story about the different situations of Muslim women in different countries. And I suggested going back to Cairo, because I'd lived there for four years, and then I said, well, why don't I go to Iran? I had always wanted to go there and had not managed to while I was in the Middle East. I was very curious about the country, and my editor said, sure, go to Iran.

So I went, for only one week. And, as Mrs. Helms knows, one week was enough. I was hooked. It is a fascinating country—Incredibly complicated, with a deep history, a deep civilization—Humorous, welcoming, fascinating people. And I said, well, this is going to be something. And there was another aspect, too: the United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran. It was a challenge just to get a visa, and it was, in CIA-speak, a "denied area," a "hard target," a place that the American government and the American people knew very little about. I knew that if I went to Iran, I would increase my capital with U.S. government officials and they would want to speak with me when I got back, since they couldn't go, but I could as a journalist.

It's hard to think of two countries that have a more difficult history than the United States and Iran. In my book, I compare them to a once happily-married couple that has gone through a bitter divorce. I

write that, "harsh words have been exchanged. Husband and wife have even come to blows, and employed others to inflict more punishment. Apologizing is hard, and changing behavior even harder. The relationship is unequal, with one side or the other feeling more vulnerable at any given time, and afraid that the other will take advantage of concessions. Attempts to reconcile have come to naught. Well-intentioned intermediaries have failed and unsavory go-betweens profited at the couple's expense. Relatives and friends have argued for and against reconciliation, each wanting credit for restoring the marriage or convincing the couple that they are better off apart."

There are so many ironies in the relationship. The government of Iran—which Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has called an "outpost of tyranny"—arose from a revolution against a tyrannical regime that was backed by the United States. The Iranian students who seized the U.S. Embassy in 1979 were actually copying tactics that had been used by American students to protest the Vietnam War only a few years earlier. The students thought they'd only be there for a day or two. They didn't know it was going to go on for 444 days. Both countries are proud and nationalistic, and both have real grievances against each other. Iran lost a quarter of a million people in the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988, and the United States supported Iraq in that war. Besides the hostage crisis, of course, the U.S. has grievances. Iran is responsible for the deaths of at least several hundred American military people in Lebanon, and Iraq, and probably scores of Israeli civilians.

Weaker than the United States or Israel in conventional terms, Iran strikes through Arab proxies, primarily Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. The U.S. military now charges that Iran is also providing weapons and training to Shiite militias in Iraq. Just last week, the White House designated the Quds Force or the Jerusalem Force of Iran's Revolutionary Guards for sponsoring terrorism, claiming that Iran is now helping the Taliban in Afghanistan, which Iran once helped the United States to defeat.

And then there's the nuclear program. It's understandable, in Iranian terms, when you consider the neighborhood they're in, almost everyone around them has nuclear weapons. And of course Iran fears a U.S. or Israeli attack. But at the same time, it's not something that inspires confidence or comfort in a part of the world that's already so unstable. And in fact the tension is now so high that, as I mentioned, President Bush has warned that if Iran continues this program, it could lead to World War III.

In my book, I try to do several things. I examine Iran internally, I look at the constituencies: the Revolutionary Guards, the clerics, the young people, the reform movement, the opposition, both inside and outside the country. But I also look, in great detail, at the missed opportunities between the U.S. and Iran for reconciliation. I think that is really the major theme of the book, and it's why I called it "Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies".

I'll start very briefly with the administration of the first George Bush. I interviewed Brent Scowcroft at length for this book, and he told me that the Iranians were actually quite interested at that time in trying to improve relations. You might remember that George Bush I said in his inaugural address that goodwill will beget goodwill. And the Iranians helped secure the release of the last American hostages in Lebanon. Scowcroft told me that emissaries from Iran and businessmen who had dealings there would come and tell him that the Iranians really wanted to start some kind of dialogue with the United States. And Scowcroft said they were enthusiastic about this; he told me that "We're happy to do it. We could have it official, public, or private citizen to private citizen, any way you want it." And he said that the two countries actually went so far as agreeing to meet, in 1990, in Switzerland. But at the last minute, the Iranians got cold feet.

Then we come to the Clinton Administration. He came in with a much tougher posture— dual containment—as you all know. Sanctions and pressure against both Iran and Iraq. The White House put a total embargo on U.S. trade and investment in Iran, particularly in the oil industry, in 1995 and Clinton signed into law the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, which threatened sanctions against foreign companies that invested in Iran's, and Libya's (at that time) oil industry. Nevertheless, there were some improvements under Clinton, after Mohammad Khatami was elected President of Iran in 1997. He was a reformer, and he came in calling for a dialogue of civilizations with the United States. Clinton embraced this. I was lucky enough to be in Iran in 1998, when American wrestlers went to compete in Iran. It was the first time that American athletes had been there since the revolution. They were very scared, they were terrified in fact, but they had a reception. I remember sitting in the stadium, Azadi Freedom Stadium in Tehran, and the Iranians actually cheered for the Americans I think even more than they did for the Iranian contestants. The American flag was hanging, and it was the first time I had seen the American flag hanging in public in Iran and it wasn't being burned in an anti-American demonstration. It was quite moving.

Clinton followed up on this "pin-down" diplomacy by sending a message through Al Gore to the then Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah in May 1998. He said the U.S. was ready to begin a formal dialogue, and he even named three individuals who would represent the United States. They were going to be Bruce Rydell, a senior official on the National Security Council, Tom Pickering, who was then the Deputy Secretary of State, and David Welsh, who was then a Principle Deputy Assistant Secretary of State. The Iranians didn't respond to the overture. Clinton didn't give up; he sent a letter to President Khatami asking for Iranian help in resolving the matter of Khobar Tower. As you may remember, this was a terrorist incident in 1996. Nineteen American airmen were killed in a barracks in Saudi Arabia, and there was evidence to suggest that Iran had had some involvement in it, encouraging or aiding the Saudi Shiites who carried this out. And he sent a letter to Khatami. I describe it in my book; it was a rather complicated process. Khatami did reply, but he replied by denying that Iran had anything to do with it.

Nevertheless, Clinton kept trying. There were messages suggesting there was still some reception to this in Iran. He slightly eased sanctions on food, and medicine, and carpets. Madeleine Albright gave a major speech in 2000 where she apologized for a 1953 CIA coup which had overthrown a popular prime minister and re-installed the Shah in Iran. And she also apologized for supporting Iraq against Iran in the Iran-Iraq war. But she made one major mistake, and it's a mistake that the Bush Administration has continued and compounded. She referred very favorably to Khatami and his people, but then she talked about "unelected hands," the other part of the Iranian government, referring to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, and his appointees.

And as you know, under the Iranian system, the President is subordinate to the Supreme Leader; that's why he's called the Supreme Leader. And the President is not in a position to make any kind of deal or strategic realignment with the United States without the approval of the Supreme Leader and all of the Iranian government; they need a consensus on these issues. And you're not going to get that kind of consensus by insulting the Supreme Leader and calling him "unelected." I would still argue, though, that at the end of the Clinton Administration, despite some tactical errors, relations still were on a warming trend, they were better than they had been certainly in the previous 25 years.

Then we come to George Bush II. It's ironic to remember now that Iranian officials actually rooted for George Bush to win. They remembered his father fondly, and they thought that Bush and Dick Cheney, as oil men, would be much more pre-disposed toward improving relations with Iran than Al Gore, who the Iranians were afraid was more beholden to pro-Israel groups. From the Iranian point of view, there were a few promising signs at the beginning of the Bush Administration. Richard Haass, who was then

the Director of Policy Planning, lobbied Congress to renew the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act for only 2 years, instead of the full 5 years, but Congress extended it for the full 5 years. Then came September 11th.

This, in my mind, is the biggest tragedy for the Bush Administration and Iran, because this was an opportunity for a strategic realignment. There were opportunities there to target Al Qaeda and suicidal Sunni Islamic fundamentalism, which remains, in my mind, the biggest threats to America and interests of everyone around them. Had the Bush Administration seen 9/11 in a really strategic way it would have targeted this particular group, and not tried to target other countries and organizations that, in its view, were involved in terrorism. After 9/11, Iran was virtually alone among Muslim nations in showing real sympathy for the United States. There were spontaneous candlelit demonstrations in the streets of Tehran.

President Khatami came to the United Nations in November of 2001 for a delayed meeting of the General Assembly, and he let an American diplomat know that he was bringing an unusually large delegation with him that included intelligence and Revolutionary Guard experts on Al Qaeda. The implication was that Iran wanted to start a counter-terrorism dialogue with the United States. Khatami also asked permission to visit Ground Zero, to express his condolences for the victims on 9/11. But the State Department did not push either of these requests, and to my mind, that was the first major opportunity that was lost. Still, Iran cooperated with the United States in overthrowing the Taliban in Afghanistan. It had its own reasons for doing so; it had almost gone to war with the Taliban in 1998, because of its persecution of Afghan Shiites and an attack that killed a number of Iranian diplomats. Iran was also very helpful on the diplomatic front, in setting up the Karzai government in Afghanistan. It was an Iranian who suggested, in fact, that the document that they prepared in Bonn suggest that the new government should be democratic and respect human rights. It was an Iranian who put that in, the American forgot to.

A senior Iranian diplomat who I interviewed for the book described the mentality of the Iranian government at this time. He said, “The general impression was that this was a national tragedy for the United States, and success in addressing that tragedy was extremely important for the U.S. public in general and the administration in particular. There wasn’t another moment in U.S. history where there was more of a psychological need for success on the U.S.’s part. That’s why we consciously decided not to qualify our cooperation on Afghanistan or make it contingent on a change in U.S. policy, believing, erroneously, that the impact would be of such magnitude that it would automatically have altered the nature of U.S.-Iran relations.”

I went to Tehran in December 2001, and I was struck that people from all walks of life, once they found out that I was an American, would come up to me and express condolences for 9/11 and tell me how much they liked Americans and admired the United States. Even politicians went on the record to say that now was the time to end the estrangement that now was the time to re-establish U.S.-Iranian relations. That wasn’t something I had heard, at least not on the record, on previous visits to Iran. What I didn’t know at the time was that there actually was some diplomatic movement. The United States and Iran, in the fall of 2001, began secret high-level talks in Europe between senior officials. These were talks that grew out of multilateral discussions on Afghanistan, and they went on from the fall of 2001 until May 2003 in Geneva and Paris.

These were practical talks—they weren’t about some grand bargain. They covered issues such as how to manage Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, what to do about al-Qaeda members who were fleeing Afghanistan through Iran, and later on, what the U.S. should expect if it overthrew Saddam

Hussein. At the same time that these talks were going on, Iran's then ambassador to France, Sadegh Kharazi, prepared an agenda for negotiations dealing with all the issues of concern between the United States and Iran, including the nuclear program, Iran's policy on the Arab-Israeli conflict, and support for Hezbollah, Hamas, and so on.

There's been a lot written about this proposal and I'd be happy to talk about some details of it afterwards in the Q & A if you'd like, but the bottom line was, it never got a response from the Bush Administration. President Bush had just declared Mission Accomplished; the United States thought it didn't need any help from anybody in Iraq, and that Iran would be the next democratic domino to fall. So it was rebuffed. In my book, I quote Condoleezza Rice as saying that she doesn't even remember seeing this offer, which I frankly find hard to believe, but that's what she says.

What would have happened had the United States engaged with Iran at that point? Unfortunately, we'll never know. There certainly were divisions, and are divisions, within Iran's government that could have sabotaged any chance for reconciliation. But had the talks begun, it would have been at a much more favorable time for the United States. Mohammad Khatami was still the President, not Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. There were no centrifuges spinning at Natanz. And, of course, the U.S. situation in Iraq was a lot better than it is today. I quote Bruce Rydell, who I mentioned earlier, and I interviewed for this book. He served in three administrations; Bush I, Clinton, and a little bit into Bush II, and he said, "The irony was that Clinton pressed so hard to begin a dialogue and got nothing. Bush 43 has had opportunities to talk, and even talks themselves, but didn't want them."

There were other overtures from the Iranians as well, even after Khatami left office and Ahmadinejad came in. A new National Security Advisor, Ali Larijani, you may have heard his name, tried very hard to get back-channel talks going between the United States and Iran in the winter of 2005-06. I interviewed him early in 2006, and I had heard that he had written his doctoral dissertation on Immanuel Kant—very erudite fellow. So I asked him, "What American thinkers do you admire? Is there anyone, living or dead, that you think is a great thinker?" And he said to me, "Hadley." And I said, "What?" "Hadley." And I said, "Do you mean Hadley, Stephen Hadley, our National Security Advisor?" And he said, "Yes. He is a logical thinker." Now, from an Iranian perspective this is a huge compliment, "logical" is a very important adjective. I was astonished. Steve Hadley later joked that it almost cost him his job, so I don't think he appreciated it.

At the same time that Ali Larijani was making this public overture, he authorized one of his deputies, a man named Mohammad Jafari, to meet with Hadley or a designated emissary. I don't know how many of you saw the Frontline program that appeared last week on Iran, but Mohammad Jafari actually appeared. It's the first time he's been interviewed on television. I think I was the first journalist to interview him. At the time I interviewed him, he wouldn't go on the record, which meant I couldn't write about it for *USA Today*—my former editor here will know why. I tried desperately to get that in the paper, but failed. Though by the time I wrote the book, he did say that all his comments could be on the record.

Anyway, Hadley and the Bush Administration, refused this overture as well. So Larijani did something extraordinary. He went on the record accepting a prior U.S. offer for talks on Iraq. This is something that Condoleezza Rice had suggested in November 2005. So Larijani said, "Sure, we're ready to meet you. We'll talk about Iraq. That's what you want to talk about, fine." And a week later, Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader, publicly endorsed this overture, something he had never done before. Months previously, anyone who had publicly proposed such talks would have been considered a traitor

and thrown in prison. Once again, the Bush Administration wouldn't even accept Iranian acceptance of their own proposal.

They had reasons. At that time, Iraq did not have a government, and the U.S. was afraid that the Iraqis, particularly the Sunnis, would think that the U.S. and Iran were creating a new government for Iraq over the heads of the Iraqi people. Also, the Bush Administration had decided that it would talk to Iran, but with preconditions. This was just a few months before Condoleezza Rice announced, in May 2006, that the U.S. would meet with Iran if it would suspend its uranium enrichment program and the talks take place in a multilateral context, with the Europeans present, not just the United States at the table.

Still, I would argue that this rejection, in March 2006, had domestic consequences. It humiliated and undermined Larijani and Khomeini, and I think it convinced Khomeini that he should tilt toward Ahmadinejad, and those in the Iranian system, the more hard-line elements, who said that the Bush Administration would never take yes for an answer and that the best thing for Iran to do would be to accelerate its nuclear program and go as quickly as possible toward its capacity to get a bomb. Then the Bush Administration might sit down with it and treat it with respect. And of course, just last week Larijani resigned as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, so the other shoe dropped. He had been in an impossible situation, really, caught between American neoconservatives and Iranian neoconservatives, so he was never able to get very far.

So here we are, it's not 2003, it's not 2006. We're in a much worse position in the Middle East. Iran has accelerated its nuclear program, and now has something like 3,000 centrifuges spinning. It's already past the red line, frankly. Iranians know how to make centrifuges, and they know how to make them spin. Maybe not very well, but they're getting there. At the same time, the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the power vacuum there has vastly increased Iranian influence in Iraq. And in the rest of the region, we have Iranian clients. Hezbollah is the power broker in Lebanon now. Hamas has taken over half of Palestine. We have sanctions, and new sanctions again last week, and threats of military action, but they have not stopped Iran's nuclear program or checked its influence in the region.

The Bush Administration, in my view, has never been able to prioritize. It wants to stop nuclear proliferation, but at the same time it's still pushing for "democracy." President Bush said famously to the Iranians, "As you stand for your own liberty, we'll stand for you." And Dick Cheney said something similar just the other week, again talking to the Iranian people over the heads of the Iranian government, basically urging them to rise up and overthrow their government. So why on earth Iran should give up a nuclear program that might present a deterrent to an American attack, while the U.S. is encouraging regime change, is frankly beyond me.

For all the hysterical rhetoric on Iran, I still argue that the U.S. faces much more potent threats from Al Qaeda from groups in Pakistan which really hate the United States. Iranians don't. I frankly don't understand U.S. policy towards Iran, I think it's been very counter-productive. My last task at *USA Today*, before going over to the U.S. Institute of Peace for a fellowship, was covering Ahmadinejad in New York, when he was running around from Columbia University. So I saw him at Columbia, and I was at a dinner with him and various other events. I met one of his top advisors, and I asked him, "Why don't you accept Condi Rice's proposal? She keeps saying she'll meet with you anywhere, anytime if you'll just suspend uranium enrichment for a little bit." And this official said to me, "We think Rice is lying."

Iran simply doesn't believe that this administration is interested in talking to it, and thinks that Rice is just going through the motions to unify international opinion against Iran in hopes of getting regime

change. I'm not sure that there's anything this administration can do to change that impression, short of dropping preconditions for talks or completely changing its language about Iran in a way that I simply don't foresee. In the meantime, I'm afraid that the United States and Iran will remain, "bitter friends, bosom enemies."

Ms. Ellis: Thank you so much. We're going to open it up to questions, and I'm going to start with a question and then I'm going to try to call on everyone. I'm just wondering what your sense is about the impact of sanctions, even tougher ones, when the price of oil is going up so high, and also, Iran has many other trading partners and people to deal with, from the Chinese to the Russians to certain Europeans, so I'm just wondering what your sense is.

Ms. Slavin: I think that the most potent sanctions so far have been the banking sanctions, which really have had an impact. It's made it very difficult for Iranian businessmen to function. It's very expensive to get letters of credit, and it's caused a lot of problems in the economy. But I would still argue that Ahmadinejad's own policies have frankly been more of a problem for Iran than the sanctions have. As you point out, oil now… You know, I write in my book that if the U.S. attacks Iran, oil will go over $100 a barrel. We're already getting there! We're almost there. So as long as oil is that high, the Iranians will find somebody to take their oil and they will be able to manage, even if they just keep the cash under the bed. So I think their attitude is, they're going to hunker down and they're going to just try to get through the next 14 months and hope that a different administration will come in on this side that might be more amenable to talks.

Ms. Ellis: I just can't resist asking if you think the train has left the station in terms of taking action against Iran.

Ms. Slavin: You know, as I was coming here today I got an email, this is absolutely terrifying. This is a new Zogby poll that just came out today. 52% of Americans support a U.S. military strike against Iran, 52%. 53% believe it is likely that the U.S. will be involved in a military strike against Iran before the next Presidential election. I can understand the second, but the first is astonishing to me. It suggests that Americans have learned nothing.

Question: How was the question asked? That's very important.

Ms. Slavin: The question was, "Would you support a U.S. military strike to prevent Iran from building a nuclear weapon." Now, of course, Iran is not yet at that stage, as far as we know. But even so, the Administration has succeeded in making people so hysterical in this country. Iran is not an irrational actor. Even if it got a nuclear weapon, which would certainly not be a welcome event in the Middle East, it would not use it. It would use it for deterrence and for power projection, in the way that all nuclear powers use nuclear weapons. But still, obviously the Administration, despite everything that's gone on in Iraq, has done a really effective job in making people willing to think about military action in a third Muslim nation.

Question: Andrea Corcoran, Promontory Financial Group. I just wondered whether you felt that to some extent the Administration is being encouraged in this because I felt, myself, in traveling to that region and speaking to some representatives, that there is a contingent that definitely believes that the Shia sect is the more extremist and militaristic sect.

Ms. Slavin: I assume these are Sunnis speaking. No, I think there's a tremendous fear of a Shia revival, as Vali Nasr has written about, but many of the people that I've spoken to, still don't think that the U.S.

should take military actions against Iran. You can imagine what would happen in terms of Shia opinion if the U.S. were to do that, certainly I think Shia all over the world would rise up against the United States and would feel some sense of kinship with the Iranians. I've yet to meet a Middle East official who is advocating a U.S. strike on Iran. Clearly, they would like to see the problem go away, but I don't think they quite know how's that going to happen.

Question: Kay Larcom with Conoco Phillips. My question is, if you could speculate a little bit about the next administration, and from the point of view of domestic policy, who might, or what might be the changes that will take place.

Ms. Slavin: Domestic politics is not my forte. I have watched some of the statements that have been made. I was a little bit shocked that Hillary Clinton supported that resolution in the Senate declaring the Revolutionary Guard Corps a terrorist organization. I thought that was a dangerous resolution. The Revolutionary Guard Corps is a mass organization of about 150,000 people, most of them conscripts. The veterans of that organization defended Iran against Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War and have a kind of heroic status in society. While obviously there are elements that commit acts that we would consider terrorism or supporting terrorism, the vast majority do not, and I think it was typical of the sort of broad brush, knee-jerk kind of gestures that politicians make to satisfy their supporters, and perhaps to get elected President, that do really substantial harm to the U.S. position in terms of Iran. So I was upset by that.

Obama has said some more sensible things, but his position isn't that different. Look, it's a terrible problem. The Bush Administration, which could have negotiated about this back in 2003, will likely bequeath a mature Iranian nuclear program to the next President of the United States.

Question: Thomas Corcoran. Can you hypothesize how the Iraq war would have gone if we'd made a deal following the 2003 proposal that's in the appendix to your book?

Ms. Slavin: I can't pretend to say that the Iraq war ever would have gone well, I always thought it was a colossal mistake to go into that country. The last place on earth you'd bring democracy in the Middle East, in my experience going there, certainly in the 1980's. But clearly, there would have been a chance to reach some sorts of understandings with the Iranians, and the southern part of Iraq would have been perhaps more stable, would have had fewer difficulties in dealing with some of the Shiite groups in the country that Iran supported long before the United States came on the scene.

But that could have brought up even more problems with the Sunnis, who could have been even more paranoid about a U.S.-Iranian alliance. I think that's one of the reasons that the U.S. did not begin these negotiations; because it was afraid that the Saudis would find out and would be extremely upset. To my mind, that's still not an excuse for not exploring options. I've never understood why this administration is so afraid of talking to its enemies, but there you have it.

Question: I have two questions. The first, what is Iran's position on the current Kurdish-Turkish confrontation? And the second question is, could you please make a comment on the anarchy cooperation between Turkey and Iraq? Thank you.

Ms. Slavin: Iran is sympathetic to the Turkish position, because it has also suffered from Kurdish terrorism. There's a group called PIJAK, which is sort of the Iranian equivalent of the PKK, which has attacked Iranian soldiers on that side of the border, and Iran has actually bombed some of their sanctuaries in Iraqi Kurdistan, so I think it would be very understanding if the Turks did the same. One

of the reasons Turkey is reluctant to take military action is because of these economic ties with Kurdistan, as you point out. I think there have been a half dozen oil contracts which have been signed between the Kurdistan regional government and Turkish oil companies, so it is complicated for them. They don't want to lose those economic links, but of course they're very worried about those attacks which are coming from the PKK, which is the group that menaces Turkey.

Ambassador Albert Jónsson: Albert Jónsson, Ambassador of Iceland. My question is about the Iranians. What is your feeling about what kind of an agreement the Iranians are ready to reach with the United States, given that the United States would be willing to talk to them, and I'm talking about what kind of guarantees are they willing to give regarding the nuclear program; what kind of intrusive verification? And the background here is that they were—still are, technically—members of the non-proliferation treaty. They've got a safeguard agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency, and they cheated for years. So, how far are they willing to go to make everybody happy that they will, this time, stick to their agreement?

Ms. Slavin: The Iranians would say that they didn't cheat. What they didn't do, they did not tell the IAEA about programs, about facilities that they were building. Now their claim is that you don't have to tell them until you're actually ready to open, but… Again, so many opportunities have been lost, so much time has gone by, that I think the Iranian attitude has hardened. But it's an obvious deal, sort of like the Arab-Israeli question. Everybody knows what the deal would look like, it's just that nobody ever seems to get there. The Iranians would put very strict curbs on the program, they might have a token enrichment program with just a few centrifuges just to say they had it, under strict supervision. Most of their fuel would come from the outside—from an international consortium or from Russia. They would perhaps tone down their support for some of these groups that are committing what we consider acts of terrorism.

And in return, they would get sanctions lifted, and they would get recognition, and they would be included in security discussions about the region, and some sort of security forum; a GCC plus 3, or 4, whatever, in the region. They would get desperately needed investment in their oil and gas industries, because they're running out of oil to export. I think a lot of you probably are aware of this; that consumption is so high in Iran that they have been exporting less and less and they actually have to import a good bit of their gasoline and other refined products.

So there are plenty of cards to play. I always get furious when Condi Rice would say, Oh, you know, if we were to meet with them now, we're in a position of weakness. I don't think the United States is in a position of weakness next to Iran. We spend in one month in Iraq what they spend in a year on their defense budget. It's silly. But there's so much distrust now, and particularly between these two administrations, that it's very hard to see us getting to that point. The Iranian regime wants to survive; it wants a prosperous country, and if it can get there without sacrificing its pride and its deterrent power, I think it would do something; I think it would reach a deal. Anyway, it's worth trying.

Ms. Ellis: What impact can the Europeans have? They do a lot of trading with Iran, and some countries are more willing to go along with the sanctions than others, so I'm just wondering, what are their options, and what impact can they have at this time, since it doesn't seem like the deadlock between the United States and Iran is going to be broken at this time.

Ms. Slavin: Well, the Europeans have been fairly supportive. Their banks have cut back drastically, lots less investment and trade. Germany has cut back, France has cut back quite drastically. Of course, the effect has been to push Iran more toward China, which is basically picking up the slack, and Russia and

India. So again the question comes, the Iranians might prefer European goods, but they do have alternatives. The Security Council will remain deadlocked as long as Russia and China block more severe sanctions, so even if the Europeans agree, that's really not enough.

Ms. Ellis: Russia's taking a very high-profile position.

Ms. Slavin: It is indeed.

Question: Donna Constantinople. My question is about Ahmadinejad, in terms of his performance on the world stage of late. The Supreme Leaders, are they abused by him, proud of him, and if he is their face, in terms of what they want to project, clue us in on the psychology of this.

Question: Kathleen El Maaroufi from the Mosaic Foundation. I just wanted to add a comment. You mentioned the sympathy Iranians showed you as an American, and the demonstrations that took place after September 11th. I just want to say that that was actually through much of the Arab world. In Morocco, where we were, there were demonstrations in Rabat and Casablanca, and King Mohammed VI held special services in the Catholic cathedral in honor of the victims. In Jordan, I know there were lines that extended several days, long lines of people coming to the embassy to sign condolences for the Americans after September 11th.

Ms. Slavin: I appreciate it, I stand corrected.

Question: Susan Pearce with CSIS. I was going to ask about the role and the impact of Israel and the whole relationship with Israel and as a follow-up, the effect, if there was any, of the Israeli strike on Syria.

Ms. Slavin: First, on Ahmadinejad, I think that the Supreme Leader likes having him around, because compared to Khatami, the Supreme Leader seemed like an unattractive, hard-line old man. Compared to Ahmadinejad, the Supreme Leader seems like an intelligent, wise, moderate individual. So he's a good foil. And when he wants to project toughness, he sends out mad dog Ahmadinejad. Within Iran, he's not a very popular President anymore. He really wasn't even when he was elected; he got 37% of the vote in a run-off, which was enough to beat the other candidate, but it was 37% of the electorate, so he was never chosen by the masses. And the economic situation in the country is so poor now that he's even losing his own constituency among the poor and the working class.

I appreciate your correction on that. I was certainly in countries like… well, Palestinians, a lot of them said they were glad; Egyptians, Saudis. There were conspiracy theories that the Jews did 9/11, you know all of this. But it's nice to know there were some others. Iran was quite striking though, I think, in that.

Israel, oh my. That opens a whole kettle of fish. The Israeli position toward Iran has been very influential in terms of the American position toward Iran. When Israel decided that Iran was enemy number one, guess what? The Clinton Administration did too. I mean, there were reasons for that. There was an upsurge in terrorism in Israel in the mid-'90's, primarily by groups that were getting support from Iran. So Israel did see it as a threat, and Israel was also very aware of this incipient nuclear program, which by the way, was started by the Shah, not only with U.S. support. The U.S. gave him his first reactor and signed a contract for eight more in the 1970's, so this is not a program that originated with the Islamic republic. It started way before. And Khomeini even slowed it down for awhile, and

only restarted it as a result of the Iran-Iraq war and the Iraqi use of chemical weapons—U.S.-supplied chemical weapons—against Iran.

Be that as it may, the Israelis saw this as a threat, and so they began to press Washington, and Washington was receptive. APEC played an enormous role in terms of passing the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, that was an APEC baby; it was their legislation. And they have continued to lobby for very, very, very tough sanctions against Iran. Would the U.S. have done that without Israel? I don't know. I mean, Iran, even with a nuke, is not an existential threat to the United States. But it is to Israel. And it's a threat—again, I don't think Iran would use them—but it would inhibit Israel's room for a maneuver, if Iran had nukes. Former Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh said that if Iran has nukes, Jews won't move to Israel. They'll feel afraid. And so I think that's the bigger existential threat, frankly, not that Iran would actually use a nuclear weapon.

In terms of the strike on Syria, that happened after I had finished my book and put in the last correction. I think clearly the Israelis mean it as a demonstration to the Iranians that they are aware of what's going on and they will strike if their interests are threatened. However, I argue in my book that Israel would not really be able to accomplish this on their own; they would need U.S. help, because of the distances involved and the number of sites that are involved. So Israel could not do what it did in Syria, or the Osirak reactor where they destroyed the Iraqi reactor in 1981, it wouldn't be that simple.

Question: Cynthia Helms. I think you added a lot to people's understanding of the complication of this whole area, but I just want to ask a minor question. Why do you think Khatami came here last year? I couldn't figure it out. I went to see him, and it was interesting. Why did he come?

Ms. Slavin: I think for a number of reasons. When I first met him at the United Nations, I think it was back in 1998 or 1999, he expressed a lot of regret that he was only there for the UN General Assembly and that he didn't get to see the whole country. He had always wanted to travel in the U.S., but just simply couldn't do that as President. And the other reason is that I think he wanted to show Americans that Ahmadinejad is not Iran, and was not the Islamic Republic of Iran. I mean, here's a man, a descendent of the prophet—sorry, not a descendent of the prophet. White turban, not black turban. Black turban, descendent of the prophet, a Sayyed. He was a reformer, who wanted to change the Iranian system for the better, and who spoke of dialogue of civilizations and bringing down the bulky wall of mistrust between the two countries and all of this, and he wanted to contrast that with denial of the Holocaust and wipe Israel off the map. And I think he did a very effective job of doing that.

Again, there's a whole chapter in my book about the clerics. The majority of the clerics at the Qom, which is Iran's theological center, oppose the current form of government that Iran has. They believe it's sacrilege to have a supreme religious leader, because you're not supposed to have such an individual in the absence of the hidden imam, who is supposed to come back someday and bring justice and peace to the world. So this is sacrilege. But of course, once in power people don't like to give it up, and there is a group of what I call political Ayatollahs who run the system, who benefit from it, whose families benefit from it, and they're the new ruling class. It's like a new Communist party, they don't want to give it up.

Ms. Ellis: Well, I think we have come to the end of an absolutely wonderful program. I think that we all have learned a lot and I think everybody should get a copy of her book so you can learn even more. We want to wish Barbara all the best and thank you all so much for coming. She'll be signing her books outside.