

Keeping Up the Pressure

The Obama administration's efforts to engage Iran over its illicit nuclear program will only succeed if backed by crippling economic sanctions. Without that pressure, Iran will have no incentive to accept the administration's diplomatic overtures and abandon its atomic work.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates explained the concept well. "Perhaps if there is enough economic pressure placed on Iran, diplomacy can provide them an open door through which they can walk if they choose to change their policies," Gates said. "I think the two go hand in hand, but I think what gets them to the table is economic sanctions."

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer and several key committee chairmen have expressed similar sentiment. The senior Democrats sent a letter to President Obama that calls on him to impose new sanctions against Iran if his policy of engagement does not lead Tehran to verifiably suspend its uranium enrichment efforts within a few months. The letter further recommends that U.S. engagement with Iran should not be open-ended.

That last point is crucial; time is of the essence. According to a recent IAEA report, Iran has acquired 1,000 kg of low enriched uranium—an amount that if further enriched to a weapons-grade level is enough for a nuclear bomb.

Amid all the diplomatic flurry over Iran, the Obama administration has made clear that sanctions efforts will continue. Stuart Levey, a sanctions advocate who served as the Bush administration's undersecretary of the Treasury for terrorism and financial intelligence, has retained his post. In the last administration, Levey worked to isolate Iran in the international financial system, sanctioning Iranian banks and financial institutions that do business in the Islamic Republic.

As Obama proceeds with his "carrots and sticks" approach to Iranian engagement, there is more that he can do to encourage a change in the Islamic Republic's behavior. He can start by enforcing existing sanctions laws that he supported as a senator. Obama also has the power to sanction the Central Bank of Iran as well as any foreign entity continuing to do business with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines—both entities singled out by the Treasury department for involvement in Iran's missile programs.

In addition, Obama can lead an international effort to encourage a voluntary ban on the sale of refined petroleum products to Iran. With Iran importing 40 percent of its gasoline, such a move would have an immediate effect. Obama backed this move during his campaign. "If we can prevent them from importing the gasoline that they need and the refined petroleum products, that starts changing their cost-benefit analysis, that starts putting the squeeze on them."

As engagement continues, "putting the squeeze" on Iran is exactly what is needed. The mullahs in Tehran need to be presented with a stark choice: End their nuclear program or face draconian economic pressure.