



Iran, Climate Change and a Bipartisan Agenda

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Election Day finally arrives in America and whichever candidate emerges victorious will inherit a presidency that is sure to be a decisive one given what is at stake. To the careful observer of US political trajectory, two issues stand out as the most consequential in regards to the security and wellbeing of not only the domestic population, but the rest of the world as well. These are anthropogenic global warming and uranium enrichment in Iran. The first issue is significant due to its uncontroversial [implications for human catastrophe](#) if left unchecked. The second, because of the financial and social burdens of possible military escalation which, given the players involved, could [trigger nuclear disaster](#). The ambiguous manner in which these subjects are treated in the public arena reveals much about the intentions behind current policy.

Challenging conventional wisdom about climate change

Most Americans that step outside and/or watch TV know that these are major issues. However, the reasons for their importance are often omitted from public discussion as was made clear in the recent presidential debates. Moreover, President Obama's virtual silence on the climate issue has upset many now disillusioned by the failure of actions to match the clean energy sentiments he voiced in 2008.

Furthermore, climate skepticism is given an unusual level of prominence in US press by international standards as [revealed by a recent study](#) published by an Oxford University researcher. The study, which compared articles from *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* to equivalent newspapers in Brazil, China, France, India, and the UK, concluded that there is "evidence for seeing a greater presence in the US media of the sort of scepticism [sic] which strongly attacks the scientific legitimacy of climate change policy proposals compared to all the other five countries."

Action on climate change is further constrained by the political context within which mainstream politicians operate. Writing in the *New York Times*, Scott Shane [recently observed](#) that "in the current fiscal environment, promising an ambitious effort to reduce poverty or counter global warming might imply big new spending, which is practically and politically anathema." As Shane writes, "any candidate troubled by how the United States lags behind its peers in health or education has plenty of advisers and consultants to warn him never to mention it on the stump".

Despite the silence from politicians and the steady stream of propaganda from the climate denial front, a recent report

published by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication found that a large majority (74%) of the American population agree that global warming is affecting weather in the United States. Furthermore, this number is up by 5 points since Spring 2012. In other words, unusually warm months and frequent droughts are not passing unnoticed. The problem is that the connection to human activity is not being made as often as it should be. [Recent Pew pollings](#) shows that 42% of Americans acknowledge the human origin of global warming (incidentally, the numbers are 18% and 63% for Romney and Obama supporters respectively). The data indicate that though people are recognizing that the weather is becoming increasingly abnormal, they hesitate to draw anthropogenic conclusions despite the scientific consensus.

This comes as less of a surprise, however, when we consider the power of the interests driving the debate. [An American Petroleum Institute strategy memo](#) famously published in the *New York Times* in 1998: “Victory will be achieved when average citizens ‘understand’ (recognize) uncertainties in climate science...[and] media coverage reflects balance on climate science and recognition of the validity of viewpoints that challenge the current ‘conventional wisdom’”. This is still the strategy of Big Oil today. Take, for example, a [report on climate change](#) authored by Patrick Michaels of the Cato Institute in October 2012. Some of its “key findings” include “Impacts of observed climate change have little national significance;” “Sea level rises caused by global warming are easily adapted to;” “Policies enacted by the developed world will have little effect on global temperature” (10). The Cato Institute was co-founded by Charles Koch, CEO of Koch Industries Inc., an industry giant in oil refining and associated manufacturing. He and his brother, David, remain major shareholders at Cato.

Furthermore, the author Pat Michaels admitted to [40% of his work](#) being funded by the petroleum industry in a CNN interview with Fareed Zakaria.

Subverting Iranian autonomy

So even though everybody's frightened about bizarre weather events, our leaders and media outlets encourage uncertainty and confusion. In other words, you might be worried about the future, but you have to deal with your own assumptions about what the problem really is. On the other hand, uncertainty is not the tactic of choice when it comes to the Iran problem and the very real possibility of war. A singular perspective dominates: that Iran's enrichment program is for the sole purpose of building a bomb to use against Israel or facilitate terrorism against the West. This undoubtedly terrifying prospect has become a dogma of U.S. (and Israeli) policymakers.

This dogma, however, remains unconfirmed and questionable [despite several investigations](#). A [Reuters release](#) in March put it succinctly: "The United States, European allies, and even Israel generally agree on three things about Iran's nuclear program: Tehran does not have a bomb, has not decided to build one, and is probably years away from having a deliverable nuclear warhead". Even Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta conceded to the Senate Budget Committee that "our intelligence makes clear that they haven't made the decision to develop a nuclear weapon." All of this is consistent with Iran's repeated claims that their enrichment program is solely for civilian objectives and that it is well within its right to pursue such a program as a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and member of the International Atomic

Energy Agency. Regardless, the hardliners insist that possessing offensive capacities is the eventual goal.

Why would they pursue nuclear weapons? Here we can make educated guesses by looking at the available data. A [survey of Arab public opinion](#) published in March 2012 revealed that a large majority believes Israel and the United States to be the greatest threats to peace while only 5% believed Iran to be most threatening. Furthermore, they [opine](#) that since Israel, the chief harasser of Iran, itself possesses nuclear weapons, then Iran, too, has a right to possess them.

The idea that Iran would seek to possess a nuclear weapon as a deterrent and neutralizer of Western belligerence is not particularly novel and is understandable given the constant hostility perceived by the regional population. As recently [pointed out by Glenn Greenwald](#) in the Guardian, the security and autonomy afforded by nuclear weapons is what is most unsettling to US policymakers. The idea that Iran would use them offensively is highly implausible from a strategic standpoint. Doing so would surely invite a military retaliation on a scale that would certainly dwarf the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Even if Iran survived as a nation, a regime change would undoubtedly occur.

Regardless, the US and Israel have repeatedly threatened to attack if Iran does not scale down its enrichment program. In both countries, threats of unilateral action are in sharp opposition to public opinion showing how dismissive state leaders have become: 70% in the U.S. and 61% in Israel. Furthermore, 51% of Americans oppose a military strike *even with UN authorization*. Perhaps the most notable finding, however, is that the percentage of Americans

that consider Iran's nuclear program a threat has dropped 22 percentage points since its peak in 2002. Not only does the public not want war, the number of people convinced that Iran's enrichment program is a threat has been steadily declining. The reason could be that Iran's behavior has not been particularly hostile since 2002. As it happens, we find in some cases that their lack of hostility is actually met with confusion and apprehension by US/Israeli elites.

A recent New York Times article is particularly revealing: "Israel's defense minister [Ehud Barak] said Tuesday that the country had interpreted Iran's conversion of some enriched uranium to fuel rods for civilian use as evidence that Iran had delayed ambitions to build a nuclear weapon". Note that Iran's conversion to fuel rods is in perfect agreement with what they have repeatedly claimed to be doing: enriching uranium for civilian purposes in accord with the Non-Proliferation agreements. However, Barak's interviewer soon after wrote in The Daily Telegraph that "Iran's decision to convert much of its stockpile of 20 per cent enriched uranium into harmless fuel rods" suggests that Ayatollah Khomeini could be "more cautious than we think" and "is nervous and feeling the pressure." Perhaps by accident, he appears to violate US/Israeli dogma when he wonders whether "the ultimate destination of Iran's nuclear programme [is] still an open question?" (20).

What is the Supreme Leader of Iran "feeling the pressure" of? It goes unspoken that the US is already waging war with Iran through cyber attacks and economic sanctions that have devastated the country. Though it has become increasingly clear that Tehran will not budge, the population continues to take the beating. The annual inflation rate is over 20%—possibly even double that—while

food prices and unemployment have skyrocketed. In a [recent letter](#) to the *New York Times*, an Israeli citizen writes: “These sanctions are affecting at least 50 million women and children” and asks, with reason, “Isn’t this a form of collective punishment that might be considered a war crime under the Geneva convention?”.

Clearly the US will go to great lengths to prevent an autonomous, secure Iran. To understand why autonomy in the Middle East is so threatening a prospect, we must consider the importance of regional control to the US. Relinquishing control would enable independent development and/or allow adjacent super powers – Russia and China – to become the primary enforcers and thereby increase their global influence. Further, nuclear security would grant the current Iranian regime more control over its own energy resources which could be used to [effectively compete](#) with US clients in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. It is in this context that Israel serves its most useful function as a U.S. satellite presence in the region. Its high-tech industry, strategic location, and cultural orientation are what make it “our natural ally.” And as long as Iran is perceived to pose an “existential threat” to the United States’ enforcer in the Middle East, the hawks will not put down the drum.

The war games cannot continue

The election campaign and especially the presidential debates have made clear how necessary mythology and illusion are to economic security. If the reality of anthropogenic global warming were to become a national truism, then we may begin to question the value of our military exploits in the Middle East. Both candidates want to take steps to ensure the flow of oil and profits into US pipelines

but neither want to discuss the irreversible damage further military conflict and carbon-intensive activity could do to the economy and to the environment. Obviously the U.S. cannot relinquish its influence in the region and thereby forfeit its substantial leverage over adjacent superpowers. However, a multilateral diplomatic solution to this obvious dilemma simply will not be discussed or considered.

By focusing on the “threat” posed by Iran, the United States political apparatus is able to channel public concern in a way that justifies aggressive tactics. As long as the population is sufficiently misinformed and fearful about Iran’s nuclear program, then our military presence in the region can be scaled up conveniently — given a fitting pretext — without significant domestic opposition which is absolutely critical at this time to challenge the oil-based destruction of the environment.

More broadly, it appears that the only rational course of action is substantial public activism to redirect government intervention — not only to promote growth in the clean energy sector, but also to reign in the military-industrial complex behind fossil fuels. Though government has historically been complicit in escalating the climate-petroleum doom cycle (e.g. military exploits in the Middle East), it is the only mechanism by which the public can initiate change. To accomplish this, the propaganda campaigns against Iran and anthropogenic global warming need to be properly understood so that the right steps can be taken to circumnavigate them avoid disaster.

In this respect, Hurricane Sandy and its associated tragedies have been a slap in the face to the American people. Consequently, a

recent *BusinessWeek* cover story titled “It’s Global Warming, Stupid” acknowledged the “success of climate deniers in framing action on global warming as inimical to economic growth,” but noted that “the US can’t afford regular Sandy-size disruptions in economic activity”. This is sadly and undoubtedly true not just for the US, but for all nations and all of humanity.