On Tuesday, November 18, 2008 Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs Chairman John F. Tierney (D-MA), made the following speech about the potential for improved relations and cooperation between the U.S. and Iran at the National Iranian American Council's Policy Conference. Under the leadership of Chairman Tierney, the National Security Subcommittee has conducted extensive oversight on U.S.-Iran relations, including conducting three hearings in series entitled, "Iran: Realities, Options, and Consequences." Statements, testimonies and other information from these hearings can be found at the Subcommittee’s website.

*Thank you, Trita and all of the other event organizers, for inviting me here today.*

*It's a privilege to be a part of this event and to share the podium with my esteemed colleagues from the Senate as well as some of the foremost experts on these issues. In particular, it's good to see Ambassador Jim Dobbins and Joe Cirincione, both of whom provided invaluable testimony before the National Security Oversight Subcommittee when we conducted a series of hearings on Iran as well as a series on U.S. missile defense efforts.*

*I am hopeful that today marks the dawning of a new day for the people of the United States and the people of Iran. For too long, the vision of what could lie ahead in improved relations and cooperation between our two countries and peoples has been obscured by a lack of understanding of each other's government and people, as well as a lack of foresight and a realistic and pragmatic strategy.*

*The outgoing Administration's approach has not worked. Gone are the days of bellicose statements like "Axis of Evil," to be replaced, I hope, by a more thoughtful, deliberate approach. We need a new plan, and now is the time to formulate and implement that plan.*

*That's why I am pleased to be a part of this conference today. The "Joint Experts' Statement on Iran," in particular, is a very serious effort by an esteemed group of hard-nosed experts who understand Iran, its government, and its people. These experts are people like Ambassador Dobbins who have had direct experience in past negotiations with Iranian counterparts and people who, in my opinion, should be listened to.*

*From a U.S. perspective, one of the key features of this Experts' Statement is the section aimed at rooting out fundamental misconceptions about Iran. I think this effort is vitally important. In fact, the Subcommittee held a congressional hearing specifically on the topic of identifying who the Iranian people really are, and how their government works.*

*Myth #1 in the Experts' Statement is that President Ahmadinejad calls the shots on Iran's nuclear and foreign policy. As the statement stresses, and I quote, "the ultimate decision-maker is Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei [HAH-may-nay], the commander-in-chief of Iran's forces." The statement also concludes, "Despite his frequently hostile rhetoric aimed at Israel and the West, Khamenei's track record reveals a cautious decision-maker who acts after consulting advisors holding a range of views, including views sharply critical of Ahmadinejad." If this Experts' Statement does nothing else, it would be huge service if the cited myths were finally vanquished.*

*If policymakers – and the American people more generally – are going to be making sound, pragmatic decisions about how the U.S. should interact with Iran, its various leaders and centers of power, and the Iranian people, we first have to have an accurate picture and understanding of what's truly going on inside the country.*

*The Experts' Statement also puts forward five key recommendations on the way forward. Now is the time, I believe, to have a robust debate about alternate policy plans toward Iran, and to fully compare the pros, cons, opportunities, and risks associated with each. Now is the time to lay out specific recommendations and suggestions; to debate those options; and to make decisions.*

*When trying to figure out the best path forward, it's critical to focus not only on the immense challenges we currently face with respect to Iran – for example, its nuclear activities and its funding of Hamas and Hezbollah – it's also vital to debate and explore what the U.S. has to gain from improved relations with Iran.*

*One only needs to look on a map to see the strategic importance of Iran, with Iraq on one side and Afghanistan on the other. But it doesn't end there – improved U.S.-Iranian relations will pay dividends for us in Lebanon, Israel, Pakistan, and numerous other places of top importance to U.S. national security interests. Iran also has the world's second largest proven reserves of conventional crude oil.*

*Let's assume for a moment that we all agree that a new direction for U.S. policy toward Iran is needed, and that an approach more focused on diplomacy and negotiations makes sense. The next step is to ask ourselves whether the time is ripe to make overtures in this direction.*

*I would argue that many factors lead us to the conclusion that now is indeed the right time for a shift in strategy, in part, because the United States currently has more leverage with respect to Iran than we've had in several years. There are three main reasons.*

*First, oil is currently selling in the $50 a barrel range, and not in the $140 dollar a barrel range as it was last July. This impacts not only the economic situation in Iran itself, but also impacts the potential actions and attitudes of other countries around the world, including Russia and China.*

*Second, Iraq and the Afghanistan and Pakistan regions remain volatile, and both Iran and the United States have an interest in fostering stability in both areas.*

*Third, we have a new Administration coming to power that I hope will be able to repair and rebuild the United States' moral authority and our leadership capacity in the world.*

*These factors, to me, signify now would be an inviting time to try to meaningfully engage.*

*The million dollar question then is: will a new approach of diplomacy and negotiation work?*

*My first response is to ask: what has the outgoing Administration's approach gotten us? I would argue very little, and in many ways, it has been counterproductive.*

*So what are the signs that an alternate approach – one focused first and foremost on diplomacy and negotiation – might work?*

*I agree with those who say that while no approach is risk-free and there are no certainties in this complicated world of ours, Iran has demonstrated its desire in the not so distant past to play a useful regional role. Tactical cooperation by Iran in the lead-up and early days of the post-September 11th Afghanistan effort was fundamentally positive, and there were signs that Iran hoped this cooperation would lead to a genuine strategic opening.*

*The subcommittee heard fascinating testimony from Ambassador Dobbins, Hillary Mann Leverett, and others who were directly involved in those efforts on behalf of the United States. I would encourage everyone to read their testimony and to fully explore the history of that time period for hints about what might be possible today. Just as it did then, Iran currently has a vested interest in resolving regional issues that directly impact its stability and security, including refugee flows, cross-border smuggling and crime, as well as terrorism.*

*As I noted earlier, there is ample evidence and intelligence that Iranian leadership – especially the leadership that counts in Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei – would take a realistic and pragmatic approach to challenges. Let's remember that our most recent National Intelligence Estimate on Iran, dated November 2007, concluded that, "Tehran's decisions are guided by a cost-benefit approach."*

*Flynt Leverett put it this way, "the Islamic Republic has for many years shown itself capable of acting in instrumentally rational ways to define and advance its interests." The Expert's Statement concluded, "[t]he recent history of Iran makes crystal clear that national self-preservation and regional influence – not some quest for martyrdom in the service of Islam – is Iran's main foreign policy goal," and points to specific instances in Iran's recent history to buttress this statement.*

*It would be useful to keep this assessment in mind when judging which way forward with respect to U.S. policy toward Iran.*

*On that front, the Experts' Statement notes, "the United States and Iran support the same government in Iraq and face common enemies (the Taliban and al-Qaeda) in Afghanistan." If Iran shares these interests with the United States and Iran has acted in a cost-benefit approach in the past, there would appear to be present opportunities for increased strategic and tactical cooperation. This is why the Experts' Statement stresses that it's so important to, "[a]llow Iran a place at the table – alongside other key states – in shaping the future of Iraq, Afghanistan and the region."*

*It's also no secret that Iran's economy is struggling considerably, and this is only exacerbated by the current relatively lower price of oil. I have to believe that the prospect of improved economic relations would be a powerful motivator from the Iranian side, especially as their country's leadership looks at a population with a median age of 26 years.*

*History also gives us plentiful examples of how pragmatic, hard-nosed diplomacy has been effective in solving seemingly intractable problems; for example, helping to end the Cold War and stopping Libya's nuclear ambitions. This direct-engagement approach has even led to some progress with North Korea, a country that, unlike Iran, already boasts a nuclear weapon. Not all of these issues have been fully resolved, and there are certainly fits and starts, but real and tangible progress has been made.*

*If negotiations and diplomacy with Iran weren't to immediately pay off, there still exist real benefits to this approach, especially when considering the long-term. Polling in Iran has shown quite high approval ratings for the United States, especially when compared with the polling done in other countries in the region, including many current U.S. allies. Despite years of sanctions and all that has come before, the average Iranian citizen has a reserve of good will toward America that we can and must capitalize on.*

*In fact, in a poll last year 68 percent of Iranians favored normal relations and trade with the United States. A new strategic approach by the United States that recognizes and leverages these positive feelings could seemingly be a powerful tool and in the long-term interests of the U.S. relationship with the Iranian people. We need to heed the words of Defense Secretary Gates and others who stress the need to bolster our "smart power" institutions and abilities, and we need to take into account how various policy alternatives will impact the hearts and minds of Iranians.*

*We must remember that – in the long run – our relationship with the Iranian people is more important than any current relationship with any specific current Iranian leader.*

*It should also be stressed that trying negotiation and diplomacy does not take other policy alternatives off the table. Sanctions are not mutually exclusive to talks and are always available ultimately if need be. That said, unilateral sanctions have shown themselves to be less than successful, especially when employed in the globalized world in which we find ourselves. It's also important to stress, as the Experts' Statement puts it: "Long-standing diplomatic practice makes clear that talking directly to a foreign government in no way signals approval of the*

*government, its policies or its actions."*

*Given all this, what is the best way for the new Administration to proceed? None of us has all the answers, and we can learn from experts like those you have at this conference about the specifics for what an approach stressing diplomacy and negotiations would look like. In particular, there's the ongoing debate about whether a so-called "grand bargain" approach as espoused by Flynt Leverett, among others, makes the most sense or whether we should go forward in a more incremental manner. Flynt's recent article on the subject presents a strong argument that dissenters must, I believe, address honestly.*

*I will say, though, that the more people-to-people exchanges we have with Iranians the better. We need to welcome Iranian students and to encourage exchanges of artists and scientists and others. Moreover, I think that Congress-to-Parliament dialogues can also play a helpful role, as they have with other countries and in other contexts.*

*It is also vitally important to be clear-eyed that our nonproliferation interests with respect to Iran are critical, not only for what happens in Iran but how Iran's actions impact nonproliferation efforts throughout the Middle East and throughout the rest of the world.*

*The Experts' Statement recommends the following approach, "the United States should take an active leadership role in ongoing multilateral talks to resolve the nuclear impasse in the context of wide-ranging dialogue with Iran. Negotiators would give the nuclear talks a reasonable deadline, and retain the threat of tougher sanctions if negotiations fail. They should also, however, offer the credible prospect of security assurances and specific, tangible benefits such as the easing of U.S. sanctions in response to positive policy shifts in Iran."*

*In negotiations, you can't just get something for nothing. If we are to be serious, the U.S. must clarify its primary intentions to seek changed Iranian policies through negotiations, not changed borders or governments through military force. In addition to regional security interests, what Iran must be willing to honestly discuss has been well-rehearsed – from the nuclear issue, to its relationship with Hamas and Hezbollah, to its positions on Israeli-Palestinian matters.*

*Finally, I want to stress that one of the great strengths of our country is that we're made up of peoples and cultures from all over the world. The fact that we have so many talented*

*Iranian-Americans as a vital part of the fabric of our country and our communities is an incredible strength. And this conference is the perfect example of leadership by this community.*

*The January 20th inauguration of President Obama, followed by the June 2009 elections in Iran, present a golden opportunity for our two countries and our two peoples to improve our bilateral relations. I firmly believe that such an approach is in both of our interests. Greater cooperation and improved relations can help promote regional stability, help provide better security for both our peoples, improve economic conditions for everyone involved, preserve reliable energy supplies, help achieve vital non-proliferation goals, and lead to better lives for the children in both our countries.*

*Thank you again for having me here today and for listening.*