

**A 'Leap of Trust'? Overcoming the Distrust in US-Iranian Nuclear
Relations**

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I would like to begin by thanking Dr Ayman Khalili and the Arab Institute for Security Studies for inviting me to speak, and to the other organisers for making this important event possible. It is a great pleasure to be here in Jordan and to have the opportunity to present before such a distinguished audience.

My paper seeks to contribute to the challenge of building a WMD free-zone in the Middle East by exploring the potential for building trust between the United States and Iran in relation to the nuclear issue. It develops out of a wider research project on the potential for international nuclear trust-building in different regions that I am leading at Aberystwyth University.

The paper is organised as follows: first, I will discuss the ‘stick and carrot’ approach to Iran’s nuclear programme that was employed by the previous US administration. I will argue that this has been underpinned by a model of trust-building where the burden of building trust between Washington and Tehran has been placed solely at Iran’s door. I will then discuss two alternative approaches to trust-building that might open up new possibilities for peacefully resolving the nuclear issue. These are firstly the idea of building trust step-by-step, and secondly, the more ambitious and risky idea of a leap of trust. I will argue that the key concept in opening the door to these possibilities is recognition of the importance of the concept of the security dilemma.

The Passive model of trust

Let’s start with the model of trust-building that has guided past Western policy. It depends upon actor A – the trustor – who makes a judgement as to whether to trust actor B - the trustee, that is, the agent being trusted. The trustor places the burden of establishing a trust relationship on the trustee – the trustee has to prove trustworthiness.

This approach, I would argue, has shaped the policy of the United States and its Western allies towards Iran since it was discovered in August 2002 that Iran was in blatant breach of its obligations under the NPT. What fuels the mistrust of

Tehran's motives in relation to its nuclear programme is that if the programme is purely peaceful, why has Iran repeatedly failed to satisfy the IAEA's concerns, especially those relating to its past weaponisation activities?—

This has led the United States, United Kingdom, and France to conclude that Iran is actively seeking to become a nuclear weapons state. To prevent this, Washington and its allies have adopted a 'stick and carrot policy.'

However, this strategy has been problematic for two reasons: first, it has manifestly failed to stop Iran from expanding its number of centrifuges. Secondly, and most importantly if we are thinking about the potential for building trust, the 'stick and carrot' policy neglects the possibility that Iran's determination to acquire fuel-cycle capabilities might have been driven principally by fear and distrust of the United States.

Security dilemma sensibility

I would argue that more consideration should be given to the possibility that the United States and Iran are trapped in the dynamics of distrust that are generated by the security dilemma. The British historian, Herbert Butterfield, was the first to capture how the psychological workings of the security dilemma can lead to spiralling distrust between two states with peaceful/defensive intentions. Diplomats, he wrote, 'may vividly feel the terrible fear that [they] have of the other party, but [they] cannot enter into the [others] counter-fear, or even understand why [they] should be particularly nervous'. He went on to say that it is 'never possible for you to realise or remember properly that since [the other] cannot see the inside of your mind, [they] can never have the same assurance of your intentions that you have.'

From the security dilemma perspective, the challenge for the United States and Iran is to find ways of reassuring the other rather than provoking them – what Butterfield called entering into the other's counter-fear'. This is a critical precondition for the building of trust in situations where governments believe that they are trapped in the pernicious consequences of security dilemma

dynamics, and it requires decision-makers to appreciate that others might be acting out of fear and not malevolence.

I want to stress that there can be no certainties here and this is why policy-makers instinctively adopt worst-case thinking when coping with these dilemmas. However, it is important to be open to the possibility that others (like ourselves) might be acting out of fear and not malevolence.

However, even if leaders are able to put themselves in the shoes of actual or potential adversaries, there is the question of how to translate such individual-level empathy into state policies that might build trust. I want to suggest two ideas here. First, the idea of a graduated approach to trust-building where trust is built step-by-step, and secondly, the idea of what I call a 'leap of trust.'

Graduated Trust-Building

The graduated approach to trust-building suggests that governments can signal their peaceful/defensive intentions to an opponent by making limited moves, whilst at the same time not exposing themselves to a high level of risk if the target state turns out to have aggressive intentions.

This is one interpretation of what the Obama Administration has been doing in its initial overtures towards Tehran. However, US officials have expressed disappointment that Tehran has not reciprocated these symbolic gestures.

The problem with this US response is that the Iranian leadership has not interpreted what the United States has done so far as representing serious conciliatory moves. Tehran appreciates the new language of respect coming out of the Obama White House, but is not persuaded it has gone beyond rhetoric here?

The worry here is that the Iranian leadership is operating with what Ole Holsti called 'an inherent bad faith model.' This mindset interprets any concessions

that are made by an adversary as a trick designed to lull their enemy into a false sense of security which would then be ruthlessly exploited.

So the danger is that the Obama Administration might believe it has made a cooperative move, but this could be discounted in Tehran because of bad-faith thinking, leading to disillusionment and a shift to a more confrontational strategy in Washington.

Because the gradualist approach to building trust has such limitations, there is an alternative approach that might be pursued – making a unilateral leap of trust.

Leap of Trust

The gradualist approach encourages decision-makers to take risks only when they are confident that cooperative moves will not be exploited and/or where there is a clear margin of safety.

By contrast, the idea of a ‘leap of trust’ assumes that leaders must be prepared to take risks in order to begin building trust – risks of being rebuffed, exposed, and exploited. Rather than the dramatic moves that would signal a state’s trustworthiness coming *after* trust has been built up as in the gradualist approach, the aim of a ‘leap’ is to make a dramatic move *before* trust exists. The leap in effect brings about a sudden psychological breakthrough in the mindset of the adversary by confronting its decision-makers with a strong signal that one is prepared to trust.

A text-book example of such a leap of trust was the courageous decision by President Anwar Sadat to fly to Jerusalem in 1977 and publicly recognise Israel’s right to exist in a speech before the Knesset. His act led to a spectacular breakthrough in Egypt–Israeli relations which has endured to this day.

Given his personal commitment to building trust with Iran, is it fanciful to cast Obama in the role of Sadat, and look to the US President making a series of bold

moves that would transform Iranian attitudes towards the United States? For example, how would Iranian policy-makers respond to President Obama proposing that a multinational consortium be formed to oversee the enrichment of uranium on Iranian soil?

Sir John Thomson and Geoff Forden discussed in their papers the attractions of such an approach in terms of building the barriers to Iran turning its capabilities into a nuclear weapon, but this would not eliminate the risks of breakout, and indeed as Mark Fitzpatrick has argued, the multinational facility idea increases the potential for breakout from the NPT.

Yet by accepting this risk and the potential vulnerability that accompanies it, Washington would be sending an important signal to Iran that trust-building is possible and underway. The significance of this point is that we should not think of trust as eliminating vulnerability; rather, placing oneself in a vulnerable position is critical to the building of trust.

A leap of trust requires leaders who are psychologically prepared to risk the costs of misplaced trust if it turns out that their interpretation of an adversary's behaviour as motivated by fear and not aggression turns out to be wrong.

This raises the crucial question of whether such leaps should be furnished with a safety-net, recognising that some levels of vulnerability will simply be too great for decision-makers to risk trust. However, when we consider the risks and potential costs of misplaced trust, we also need to remember that there are important risks and costs that follow from policies of misplaced suspicion and distrust. There are no risk-free nuclear futures in the Middle East or elsewhere.

Can leaders in Washington and Tehran find the courage and imagination to make a leap that would break the psychology of distrust between the United States and Iran? Despite the President's personal commitment to a new dialogue with Iran, if, as seems increasingly likely, the administration's overtures are backed up with talk of increased sanctions if reciprocation is not forthcoming, then this is unlikely to communicate the language of mutual respect and dignity in which the

seeds of trust might grow. Perhaps, then, with the nuclear clock ticking increasingly ominously for many in this region and beyond, this is the moment for President Obama to take a 'leap of trust' on the nuclear issue.