

# USD forum panel disagrees on Iran

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Two opposite views were held at a Monday forum that asked the question, "Is war with Iran inevitable?"

The conversation took place in Farber Hall on the University of South Dakota campus as part of a series of International Forums.

Col. Damian Donahoe, senior military science instructor at USD who returned from a deployment to Afghanistan last year, held the view that a U.S./Iranian conflict is "not likely."

"Quite frankly, it's quite difficult for the president to sell this to the American public," Donahoe said. "All the actions that the current president is taking show that he is looking to resolve conflicts."

Donahoe pointed to the examples of the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and the push to move from a combat role in Afghanistan to one of assistance.

"This current president is not one who is itching for a fight, but taking means to de-escalate conflict," he said. "I really think that some time between May and October, we'll be much clearer on what truly is going to happen."

Retired economics professor Dr. Benno Wymar - who worked for about three years in Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia - disagreed.

"I would not be surprised if something would happen next year," Wymar said. "There is no question that there is much concern about Iran being able to build nuclear bombs or weapons. This is not just something you heard in Europe and the United States, but in Iran's neighboring countries."

Wymar discussed a concern held by some that Israel would bomb Iran's nuclear facilities, as they did in Iraq and Syria.

He added that Israel's leaders "pretty much suspect that President Obama would have no choice at this time but to support them" because of the upcoming election.

"If he gets re-elected, he wouldn't have to worry about those votes any longer, so they know that their window of opportunity to hit the Iranians is right now," Wymar said.

Donahoe said a nuclear program does not necessarily indicate Iran is building weapons, per se. Instead, it could allow them to exert a greater influence on the Middle East.

"But in reality, a lot of what they're doing there is to try and make (nuclear material) weapons-grade," he said.

The situation is further complicated by "the rhetoric they continue to spew, and their tacit support for some factions and some entities which have terroristic tendencies," Donahoe said.

Moderator Tom Sorensen, associate dean of the USD School of Law, said the United States is doing what it can to discourage the continuance of this program through an executive order the president signed in November.

Under this order, the United States is putting pressure on entities who are or potentially are engaging with Iran in ways that may lead to nuclear development.

"Reading some of the open source documents leads me to believe they're not as far along currently with their nuclear program and nuclear weapons that we're at that point where it's the point of no return," Donahoe added.

That point would become apparent if the U.S. stopped trying to work the situation diplomatically, he said.

"Even though we don't have formal diplomatic ties, we continue to work through intermediaries, work through other avenues," Donahoe said.

An audience member asked if Iran might see an uprising similar to those seen over the past year in a number of Middle Eastern and African nations.

Wymar said this was not very likely.

"They don't tolerate any opposition, and they are very radical in fighting this," he said.

Additionally, there is little chance of deposing Iran's leaders with the help of the U.S. because of the CIA's involvement in putting the Shah of Iran into power, he said.

"Iranians are very leery about too much U.S. involvement because it has not always been to the benefit of Iran," Wymar said.

Donahoe explained that even though Iranians take part in elections, the candidates are taken from a list approved by those already in power.

"You've got all these sets of checks and balances to make sure that certain entities remain powerful and influential," he said.

As a result, it is more difficult for the Iranians to rise up than it was for the Egyptians, Donahoe said.

"Instead, possibly it's going to take decades as some of the older folks who were there during the Iranian revolution pass on, and then some of the more radicalized folks in the current generation ... at least begin to look at what they want in the future," he said.

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