

More talk of war as Iran delays response to demand it end uranium enrichment

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The Iranian government is seeking to delay its response to the latest demands that it suspend its uranium enrichment operations in the face of threats of new European Union economic sanctions and more talk of unilateral US or Israeli air strikes.

European Union Foreign Secretary Javier Solana delivered a “Proposal to Iran” on behalf of the US, Britain, France, Germany, China, Russia and the European Union last Saturday. The proposal demanded that Iran “suspend its [uranium] enrichment and reprocessing activities” and submit to inspections of its nuclear facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In return, the major powers offered to assist Iran develop a nuclear power industry—supplied with fuel from outside the country—along with “steps towards the normalisation of trade and economic relations”.

Iran has always stated that its Natanz plant has no purpose other than generating low-enrichment fuel for nuclear power plants. No evidence to the contrary exists. The US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) issued last December assessed that Iran had not had a nuclear weapons programs since 2003 and, even if it did, it would not be able to manufacture a weapon until at least 2015. The latest IAEA report in May presented no evidence that Iran had pursued nuclear weapons since 2004.

Last Saturday’s demand is based on the Bush administration’s accusation that the Iranian government is lying. The major powers stated they “recognise Iran’s right to nuclear energy for exclusively peaceful purposes in conformity with its NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) obligations”. Yet they have again demanded that Iran cease processing the fuel needed for nuclear power reactors—which it is entitled to do under the NPT—until “international confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear program is restored”.

The European powers, Russia and China are playing a similar role as they did in response to Iraq’s denials of the US accusations it possessed “weapons of mass destruction”. Instead of the US being obliged to produce evidence to support its claims of secret weapons programs, the burden of proof has been placed on Iran. Tehran has been told that the only way Iran can demonstrate its peaceful intentions is to close down its nuclear industry and submit to a regime in which it will be dependent on other powers to provide nuclear fuel.

That the proposal should have been entitled an “Ultimatum to Iran” was spelt out by US President George Bush and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown on Monday. Brown declared that if

Iran did not accept the demand, the EU states would join the US in imposing even harsher economic sanctions, directly targeting the operations of Iran’s major state bank, Bank Melli, as well as its oil and gas industry. Bush reiterated that “Iranians must understand all options are on the table, however,” effectively threatening Iran with US military strikes.

Moreover, Iran is being ordered to accept IAEA and UN weapons inspectors roaming the country at will, supposedly looking for alleged hidden facilities. It is well established that many of the so-called “inspectors” that Iraq allowed in during the 1990s were in fact CIA agents, who collated targeting information that was later used during the 1998 US air bombardment and the 2003 invasion. Under conditions where the Bush administration has also hinted at military action against Iran over unsubstantiated allegations that Tehran is supporting anti-US militias inside Iraq, the Iranians have legitimate concerns about submitting to an inspection regime.

Officials have indicated that Tehran is inclined to reject the terms. A government spokesman, Glolam Hossein Elham, stated just hours after Solana’s arrival in Iran that “the precondition of a halt and suspension of nuclear activities cannot be brought up”. The country’s envoy to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, stated in a speech on Wednesday that the demand that Iran end its pursuit of nuclear energy was “illegitimate and illegal” under the NPT.

Officially, however, no rejection of the document has been issued. A top Iranian leader, Ali Larijani, instead stated that Iran would “carefully study” the proposal. The government also denied a report in an Iranian newspaper that it had withdrawn \$75 billion from European banks in anticipation of EU sanctions. The European Union has not yet taken any steps toward freezing Iranian assets—contrary to Gordon Brown’s premature declaration on Monday that the EU would announce such a measure at an EU foreign ministers’ meeting the same day.

Iran’s maneuvering for time stems from the recognition in Tehran that any negative response could be seized upon to justify a unilateral strike by Israel against the Natanz enrichment plant and other nuclear facilities, followed by a massive, combined US and Israeli response to any real or invented Iranian retaliation.

Earlier this month, Israel’s Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz made explicit the widely-held position in Israeli ruling class circles. He declared sanctions were “ineffective” and that “attacking Iran, in order to stop its nuclear plans, will be unavoidable”. On the weekend, Mofaz’s statements were echoed

by former Israeli Labor Party Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh, who told Israeli Radio, “the Jews stand alone against evil in the end” and war with Iran would take place “in the coming years”.

A feature in *Spiegel Online* on Monday reported: “There is a consensus within the Israeli government that an air strike against the Iranian nuclear facilities has become unavoidable. ‘Most members of the Israeli cabinet no longer believe that sanctions will convince President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to change course’, says Minister of Immigration Absorption Yaakov Edri.”

Bruce Riedel, a Middle East expert, told the journal: “There is some risk that Israel thinks it has limited time to act and it has a green light from American politicians”—above all in the Bush White House.

Ominously, new allegations have surfaced to fuel the anti-Iranian campaign in the US and Israel by calling into question the NIE assessment that Iran was years away from being able to field nuclear weapons.

Until now, the only “evidence” that Iran was on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons had consisted of plans for a nuclear warhead, supposedly found on a stolen laptop supplied to the CIA by an informant inside Iran. The Iranian government dismissed the plans as forgeries.

The *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*—all major propagators of the Iraq “weapons of mass destruction” lies—published claims on Sunday and Monday by David Albright, from the US Institute for Science and International Security, that sophisticated Pakistani designs for nuclear weapons may have been sold to Iran by nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan.

The designs were allegedly discovered among computer files seized from three Swiss citizens who had been detained over their association with Khan. The three men, under detention in Switzerland, reportedly agreed in 2003 to cooperate with the CIA to provide information on Khan’s sales to Libya. Albright claims that they did not inform US intelligence about their possession of more advanced weapons designs.

Albright’s report, published on Monday, stated: “... The designs in Switzerland included one for smaller, more sophisticated nuclear weapons than those found in Libya. These would have been ideal for two of Khan’s other major customers, Iran and North Korea. They both faced struggles in building a nuclear warhead small enough to fit atop their ballistic missiles, and these designs were for a warhead that would fit. These designs would also simplify the task of building a nuclear weapon for anyone who obtained them.”

Swiss officials reportedly had difficulty decrypting and deciphering the files. For unexplained reasons, Albright claims they did not request assistance from the IAEA until 2006. The US government requested and received copies. The Swiss government then allegedly destroyed the originals.

The main purpose of Albright’s report appears to be to create a pretext to demand that the newly-elected Pakistani government allow Khan to be interrogated over whether he sold the designs to Iran. The *Wall Street Journal* commented: “Iran’s possible possession of the Khan network’s weapons designs particularly worries US and Western counter-proliferation experts.”

Khan responded to Albright’s allegations in statements to Agence France Presse this week. He declared: “This is all a lie. There is no truth in this. We never prepared [weapons blueprints]. We are not the designer. We are not the proliferators.”

The scientist was pardoned by President Pervez Musharraf in 2004 but placed under house arrest after he admitted to selling nuclear technology. He retracted his admission after the defeat of Musharraf’s supporters in the February elections, declaring that he had only confessed due to force and intimidation.

An attack on Iran, regardless of how it were justified, would be a crime of immense dimensions. Behind all the manufactured hysteria over nuclear weapons programs lies the determination of the US ruling elite and their Israeli proxies to ensure that no state or combination of states threatens their dominance in the Middle East and, therefore, over the world’s main source of oil. The Iranian regime’s efforts over a number of years to cultivate political and economic relations with the EU, Russia and China are viewed in Washington as a direct threat.

More than two years ago, writing in the *New Yorker* magazine, journalist Seymour Hersh exposed detailed plans for massive US air strikes on Iran, involving the possible use of nuclear weapons against fortified underground bunkers. Hersh’s sources revealed that the list of targets ran into the “hundreds” and included not only military facilities and government buildings, but power plants, bridges, electricity grids and other civilian infrastructure.

There is no question that a deranged right-wing constituency exists within Israel for utilising its nuclear arsenal to slaughter millions of Iranians and reduce the country to rubble. In April, Israeli National Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said a war with Iran would result in “the destruction of the Iranian nation”. *Der Spiegel* cited this week the recent remarks of Israeli historian Benny Morris, who declared: “If the issue is whether Israel or Iran should perish, then Iran should perish”.



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