

Talks with Iran open in Geneva amid threats and provocations

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Talks between Iran and the so-called P5+1—the United States, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany—are opening in Geneva today in an atmosphere of threats and provocations generated by Western governments and media over Iran's nuclear program.

The actions of the Obama administration strongly suggest that it is participating in these first direct US talks with Tehran in 30 years not to reach a negotiated settlement, but rather to set the stage for a new round of punishing sanctions and potential military action aimed at bringing about “regime change” in Iran.

In the run-up to Geneva, Washington deliberately sought to stir up an atmosphere of hysteria at a press conference last Friday. US President Barack Obama, Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French President Nicolas Sarkozy joined to announce the existence of a supposedly secret Iranian nuclear facility 20 miles from the city of Qom.

The Western powers are now attempting to turn this facility into the centerpiece of their demand that Iran “come clean” on its nuclear program and halt all uranium enrichment efforts.

Tehran had notified the International Atomic Energy Agency four days earlier of the existence of the site and immediately began discussions on allowing the IAEA to begin regular inspections. Such inspections, already ongoing at its larger facility at Natanz, would seem to preclude the use of these plants for a weapons program.

Iran has ample reason to disperse its nuclear program, creating backup facilities, as well as to place them underground and near military bases, given the continuous threats of military attack from both the US and Israel.

The nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signed by Tehran required only that it inform the agency of the construction of a new facility 180 days before nuclear fuel is brought into it. Under these terms, Iran's announcement came at least a year earlier than required.

Iran has stated in advance of the Geneva talks that it has no intention of discussing the new plant. “The new site is part of our rights and there is no need to discuss it,” said the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, Ali Akbar Salehi. “We are not going to discuss anything related to our nuclear rights.”

Instead, Tehran has proposed a broader agenda, dealing not only with non-proliferation, but the situation in Afghanistan, United Nations reform and other issues.

“They may not, but we will,” White House spokesman Robert

Gibbs said in response to Tehran's statement that it would not discuss the Qom facility. He continued, “The onus is on the Iranians to show the world that the program that they have is a peaceful program to create energy, rather than a secret program for nuclear weapons.”

Such statements echo the rhetoric employed by the Bush administration in its campaign over supposed Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in the run-up to the Iraq war. “The onus” was then on Baghdad to prove the non-existence of such weapons, an impossible task.

The Western media all highlighted a statement Wednesday by IAEA head Mohamed ElBaradei that Iran was “on the wrong side of the law” in not declaring its new enrichment plant as soon as construction began (a revision of the NPT that Tehran has never accepted). In the same interview with the Indian television news channel CNN-IBN, ElBaradei stated, “I have not seen any credible evidence to suggest that Iran has an on-going nuclear [weapons] program today.” This second statement was universally blacked out of Western media coverage.

Washington continued Wednesday to invoke the Qom facility in support of its ultimatums to the Iranian government. As the *Washington Post* reported, “US officials believe the revelation of the facility, hidden in an underground bunker near the holy city of Qom, has given them leverage heading into the talks.”

Speaking at the United Nations, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton demanded that Iran “comply with its international obligations” or face “greater isolation and international pressure.”

Iran's compliance with its supposed obligations, she continued, “would mean not only offering inspections, but ending its activities absent the kind of monitoring and supervision that would guarantee that what they are doing is solely for peaceful purposes.” In other words, Washington is demanding that Iran accept a special regime of Western “supervision” demanded of no other country.

Washington is using the Qom plant in its attempt to sway Russia and China to support another round of United Nations sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program.

While Russian President Dmitry Medvedev joined the US and other Western powers at the G20 summit in Pittsburgh in threatening sanctions against Iran, a spokesman for the Kremlin Wednesday said that Moscow's attitude would be determined by whether or not Tehran cooperated with the IAEA. Russia has previously resisted stronger sanctions, having little interest in

seeing the US tighten its grip over the oil-rich nation on its border.

As for China, it is reportedly sending a low-ranking official to the talks, indicating that it has no intention of shifting from its own opposition to new sanctions. Iran presently accounts for 15 percent of China's oil imports, and Chinese investments in Iran amount to over \$100 billion, as Beijing seeks to secure its supply of energy resources from the country.

The Associated Press cited unnamed Western officials as saying that the US, Britain, France and Germany are "ready to do without Russia and China if they again block new UN sanctions out of economic or political considerations."

In anticipation of Washington imposing another set of unilateral sanctions, the chairman of the US Senate Banking Committee, Senator Christopher Dodd, a Connecticut Democrat, announced Tuesday that he is introducing legislation that would seek to choke off Iran's gasoline supplies by targeting both companies that export refined petroleum products as well as financial firms that insure such shipments. Despite its massive oil reserves, Iran lacks adequate refining capacity to supply its home market and is dependent on imports for 40 percent of its gasoline.

The aim is to have sanctions legislation in place by December, when both Washington and the European powers intend to declare negotiations with Iran at an impasse and move towards punitive measures.

There is a striking asymmetry in the Geneva talks. Iran has no atomic bomb and insists that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only. It sits alone across the table from the US, which has an immense nuclear arsenal and is the only country to have used atomic weapons against civilian populations. It also faces four other nuclear-armed states—Britain, France, Russia and China—together with Germany, which has completed the processes that Iran is being told to halt, acquiring all it needs to begin churning out nuclear warheads on short notice.

Washington, which is itself out of compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty, lectures Tehran for allegedly "breaking rules that all nations must follow," as Obama put it last week. Meanwhile, the US denounces the member nations of the IAEA for demanding that Israel, which has an estimated 200 nuclear warheads and has refused to sign on to the NPT, open up its own facilities for inspection.

In advance of the Geneva conference, there has been a growing chorus in the media calling on the Obama administration to press the issue of "human rights" with the Iranian government, i.e., using the nuclear issue to strengthen the hand of Iran's "green" opposition in the hopes of achieving regime change.

Writing in the *Washington Post*, Robert Kagan, who serves as an advisor to Gen. Stanley McChrystal on the proposed "surge" in Afghanistan, called for the implementation of "crippling sanctions as soon as possible," instead of going through the motions of diplomacy. "The odds that the regime might fall given the right mix of internal opposition and foreign pressure are higher than the odds that it will give up its nuclear program voluntarily," he wrote.

In a column published in the *Wall Street Journal*, the right-wing warmonger Michael Ledeen also dismissed the talks in Geneva, writing: "A change in Iran requires a change in government. Common sense and moral vision suggest we should support the

courageous opposition movement."

The British daily *Telegraph* opened its opinion columns to a rather unlikely "human rights" advocate, who wrote: "If the West enforces new sanctions that are intrinsically tied to the national outcry for freedom, they have armed their greatest ally with the powerful weapon of international solidarity in the struggle against the Islamic regime. This uprising can change the entire fabric of stability in the Middle East."

The author was Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, the son of the Shah, whose regime was synonymous with repression and torture before its overthrow in the 1979 revolution.

As all of these columns make clear, Washington's aim in relation to Iran is not the halt of nuclear proliferation, but regime change, i.e., bringing to power a government that is more amenable to US strategic aims—now being pursued by two wars—in the oil-rich Persian Gulf and Caspian Basin. The nuclear question is one means of pursuing this objective, while support for the pro-Western opposition is another.

The third option, of course, is the military one. Even as the exercise in diplomacy got underway in Geneva, it was clear that this option was, as Obama put it last week (echoing George W. Bush), not "off the table."

The BBC reported Wednesday: "If there is no progress, consideration will be given to further sanctions and if, by the end of the year, there is still deadlock, then according to one diplomat, 'it will be impossible to say that there is any more that diplomacy can do and we will be in a dangerous place'. That, in plain language, is a reference to the possibility that Israel might thereafter decide to attack Iran's nuclear facilities."

Meanwhile, the Israeli web site *Debka File* reported that the Pentagon has placed a rush order for the production of a "15-ton super bunker-buster bomb," the so-called Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP), which is capable of striking targets more than 60 meters underground before exploding. It is pushing to have 10 of the bombs by December 2009, according to Debka, which added, "Air Force units were also working against the clock to adapt the bay of a B2a Stealth bomber for carrying and delivering the bomb."

Last August, the Pentagon requested \$68 million to speed up the production deadline for the MOP to July 2010, describing the bomb as the "weapon of choice" for dealing with Iran.



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