

# Wrangling continues over Iranian nuclear deal

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An international agreement on the export and processing of Iran's low-enriched uranium is yet to be finalised after sharp opposition emerged this week within the political establishment in Tehran. An initial Iranian response handed yesterday to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reportedly contains caveats that are unlikely to be accepted by the US and its European allies.

Under the arrangement, three quarters of Iran's stockpile of 1.5 tonnes of low-enriched uranium would be shipped to Russia and France for further enrichment and manufacture into fuel rods for Iran's research reactor in Tehran. The deal was foreshadowed in talks in Geneva on October 1 between Iran and the so-called P5+1—the US, France, Britain, Russia, China and Germany—and concretised in negotiations involving the US, Russia, France and Iran last week in Vienna.

The US, Russia and France signed off on the agreement last Friday, but Iran, while indicating a favourable view, asked for more time to consider the proposal. Over the past week, public criticism has pointed to a fierce debate within the Iranian regime over whether to accept the deal. Having exploited the nuclear issue in the past to whip up nationalist sentiment, all factions of the ruling elite have a great deal at stake politically.

In comments last Saturday, parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani condemned the deal, accusing the West of “trying to cheat and impose [its] will on us”. He told the Iranian media: “My guess is that the Americans have made a secret deal with certain countries to take 4.5 percent enriched uranium away from us under the pretext of providing nuclear fuel [to us].” Larijani was the country's chief nuclear negotiator until he resigned in 2007 and is regarded as close to Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The conservative Iranian newspaper *Kayhan* was even more strident in its rejection, declaring: “Iran's response is

that it will not give even one milligram of its enriched uranium to be changed into 20 percent enriched uranium by foreigners. America, Europe and Israel, these American cowboys, old British foxes and Zionist child murderers, want to use this ploy to take Iran's uranium and not give it back.”

While the Western media accuse Tehran of playing for time, Larijani's criticisms resonate within the political establishment and more broadly. At the talks in Geneva, Iran agreed in principle to the enrichment deal and to open up its enrichment plant under construction near Qom to IAEA inspectors, but has received nothing in return. Tehran bitterly recalls its previous decision to suspend uranium enrichment in 2004-05 in return for negotiations with Britain, France and Germany over a package of economic and political incentives, only to be offered what it branded as “an insult” by the Europeans.

In the course of negotiations in Vienna last week, Iran objected to France's involvement, pointing out that it had previously reneged on agreements. Prior to the 1979 revolution, Iran paid more than \$1 billion to France to help build a nuclear reactor. After the ousting of Shah Reza Pahlavi, Paris refused to honour the deal or return the money. The disagreement last week in Vienna was patched up with a clause that made France a subcontractor to Russia, but deep suspicions remain inside Iran.

The extent of the disagreements is underscored by the comments of defeated presidential candidate Mir Hossein Moussavi, who criticised President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for having undermined Iran's nuclear program by engaging in negotiations. If the enrichment deal were realised, he told the Kaleme web site, “then the hard work of thousands of scientists would be ruined”. Noting that he had been accused of having relations with the West, Moussavi accused “the serving sons of the nation” of “openly humiliating themselves in front of the US”.

The emergence of Moussavi as a critic of the deal may not be exactly what the US expected. The Obama administration backed Moussavi, his “green revolution” and opposition protests following Iran’s presidential election in June, regarding him as an alternative more amenable to closer relations with the US. While obviously aimed at scoring points against his rivals, Moussavi’s comments play to broad anti-imperialist sentiment in Iran.

Defending the agreement yesterday on state television, Ahmadinejad presented the negotiations as something of a victory—a move by the US “from confrontation to cooperation”—and said Iran would “welcome the exchange of fuel”. He warned, however, that Iran would “not retreat even an iota from its nuclear rights”—a reference to its right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to enrich uranium.

Iranian officials presented the IAEA with an initial response to the proposal yesterday. While details have not been made public, the pro-government newspaper *Javan* reported on its website that the government had accepted the general framework of the deal but was seeking two changes—slowing the delivery of Iran’s low-enriched uranium to Russia and providing the “simultaneous exchange” of fuel rods for the Tehran research reactor.

The caveats are clearly designed to placate critics at home, but are not likely to be accepted by the US if Iran is able to easily replenish its store of low-enriched uranium. As far as the Obama administration is concerned, the purpose of the agreement is to substantially reduce Iran’s stockpile and eliminate any possibility that it could be turned into the highly-enriched uranium needed for a bomb. Iran has insisted all along that it has no intention of making nuclear weapons.

IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei noted that Iran had provided an initial response and indicated that the IAEA was involved in further discussions with Tehran. To date, none of the P5+1 powers has commented. The US State Department simply declared that it was awaiting a formal response from Tehran.

Despite the rather low-key reaction, the US is continuing to maintain intense pressure on Iran. Obama administration officials have repeatedly declared that the US will not negotiate indefinitely and have imposed a deadline of December for significant programs. US involvement in negotiations with Tehran is also designed to press Russian

and China for tough action should Iran fail to agree to Washington’s demands.

US National Security Adviser James Jones bluntly outlined Washington’s strategy in comments to a pro-Israeli lobby group on Tuesday. “Iran now needs to follow through on its commitments,” he declared, adding: “Nothing is off the table. We will see if engagement is able to produce the concrete results we need, and we’ll be prepared if it does not.”

The US is threatening crippling economic sanctions, including a ban on sales of refined petroleum products to Iran. While it has large reserves of gas and oil, Iran lacks refinery capacity and has to import around 40 percent of its gasoline needs. By declaring “nothing is off the table”, Jones is also underlining that all options—including military attacks against Iran—are being planned and prepared.

In comments to the British-based *Telegraph* earlier this week, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner also highlighted the danger of war. “They [Israel] will not tolerate an Iranian bomb. We know that, all of us. So that is an additional risk and that is why we must decrease the tension and solve the problem. Hopefully we are going to stop this race to a confrontation,” he said.

Kouchner’s remarks are not only a reminder of Israel’s repeated threats to strike militarily at Iran’s nuclear facilities, but also of the hypocrisy of France and the other major powers. While Iran and its alleged plans to build nuclear weapons are demonised as a threat to world peace, the threat by nuclear-armed Israel to launch another unprovoked attack on a neighbour is raised without a hint of criticism.

The obvious double standard highlights the fact that the US, France and their allies are exploiting the nuclear issue as a pretext to advance their own economic and strategic interests in energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.



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