

IAEA inspection team intensifies pressure on Iran

Peter Symonds
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International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors arrived in Iran yesterday for a critical two-day visit. If Iran fails to satisfy the inspectors over its nuclear programs, the way is open for a negative IAEA report, due later this month, and escalating sanctions and military threats by the US and its allies.

The Iranian regime has repeatedly declared that it has no plans to build nuclear weapons. It has branded IAEA evidence of alleged military aspects of its nuclear programs as fabricated. The IAEA has few independent sources of information and relies heavily on foreign intelligence agencies, including those of the US and Israel. Most of the allegations relate to programs that the IAEA itself acknowledges ended almost a decade ago.

Deputy director general Herman Nackaerts, who heads the IAEA team, told the media: “The highest priority remains the possible military dimensions of Iran’s nuclear program, and we want to tackle all outstanding issues.” He has asked to visit the Parchin military site, an alleged testing ground for nuclear weapons components, and to interview nuclear scientists.

The modus operandi of the IAEA inspection team follows the pattern of the “weapons of mass destruction” inspectors inside Iraq before the US-led invasion in 2003. Every “possible military dimension” of Iran’s nuclear program becomes the pretext for a never-ending process of demanding greater access to sensitive installations and to key officials and scientists. Tehran is being asked to prove the impossible—that no weapons research has ever taken place anywhere in its vast territory.

Last week, Iran’s top nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili sent a letter to European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, agreeing to new talks with the so-called P5+1—the permanent members of the UN Security Council (the US, France, Britain, Russia and China) plus Germany. Jalili said the success of any talks would depend on whether the grouping respected Iran’s initiatives on its nuclear programs.

Iran insists that its programs conform to its obligations under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), which allows for signatories to develop all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium enrichment, for peaceful purposes. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced last week that the country had manufactured its own fuel rods for a research reactor in Tehran that produces medical isotopes and had begun using more sophisticated gas centrifuges for uranium enrichment.

If a meeting does occur between representatives of Iran and the P5+1, the US and its European allies will exploit the opportunity to reiterate their ultimatums rather than engage in any genuine negotiations. The US continues to make unsubstantiated allegations that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons and demands an end to all programs that could potentially provide material for a nuclear bomb—including uranium enrichment and a heavy water research reactor being built at Arak.

The Obama administration is continuing to wind up the pressure on Iran through tough economic sanctions. By the end of June, the US is threatening to take punitive action against any financial institution or

corporation internationally that does business with Iran's central bank—a move that would block Iran's oil exports. These sanctions are being complemented by an EU embargo on oil imports from Iran, due to come into force at the same time.

Tehran responded pre-emptively by announcing on Sunday an end to its oil exports to Britain and France—two of Washington's chief allies in the mounting confrontation with Iran. At the same time, Iran's deputy oil minister Ahmad Qalebani warned that “if the hostile actions of certain European countries continue, oil exports to these countries will be stopped.”

The Iranian regime is clearly seeking to open up divisions in the European Union (EU). While Britain and France rely on Iran for just 1 percent and 3 percent of their oil imports respectively, other European countries depend heavily on Iranian oil. Greece imports one third of its oil from Iran and sought guarantees before supporting the EU embargo. Italy and Spain each import about 13 percent of their oil from Iran.

Publicly, the Obama administration supports economically crippling sanctions on Iran as the means to force Tehran's capitulation. At the same time, however, the “military option” by the US or its chief Middle Eastern ally, Israel, is openly discussed and debated in ruling circles and the media.

Differences between the US and Israel involve purely tactical considerations, especially over the timing of any military attack on Iran. Obama's top national security adviser, Tom Donilon, arrived in Israel on Sunday for talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu aimed, according to the media, at urging Israel to allow the sanctions to impact on Iran.

US joint chiefs of staff chairman, General Martin Dempsey, speaking on CNN last Sunday, warned it was “not prudent at this point” for Israel to attack Iran's nuclear facilities. British Foreign Secretary William Hague made a similar point to the BBC, saying: “I don't think a wise thing at the moment is for Israel to launch a military attack on Iran.”

Neither the US nor Britain has condemned Israeli preparations for a brazen and criminal act of aggression against Iran because both countries insist that “all options are on the table” and are making their own plans for war. The Pentagon has doubled the number of aircraft carrier battle groups near the Persian Gulf to two and warned of military action in the event that Iran attempts to close the Strait of Hormuz.

A comment in the British-based *Financial Times* on Sunday, entitled “Obama nears his nuclear moment,” pointed to the concerns of Obama's electoral strategists over a possible conflict with Iran in an election year. “Yet that is what many in Washington are now calling a ‘probability’. Some White House officials have referred to 2012 as the ‘year of Iran’,” the newspaper noted.

A *Guardian* editorial, headlined “Iran: stumbling into war,” remarked: “There are two possible outcomes of the barrage of words being launched against Iran: a war that starts inadvertently... or a war that starts after an attack by Israel. A negotiated climb-down by both sides is the least likely option, although the venue for one still exists [at P5+1 talks with Iran].”

These comments reflect fears in sections of the European ruling classes that a conflict would not be limited to air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, but would escalate to embroil the Middle East and potentially other powers such as Russia and China. But that is exactly the path being recklessly pursued by the Obama administration as it seeks to advance its economic and strategic ambitions in the energy-rich region.



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