

Iranian nuclear talks on brink of collapse

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Talks over Iran's nuclear programs in Baghdad all but broke down yesterday amid sharp differences between the P5+1 grouping (the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany) and Iranian negotiators. To prevent an open breach, previously unscheduled negotiations were announced for June 18-19 in Moscow.

European Union (EU) foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton put the best possible face on the outcome, declaring: "It is clear that we both want to make progress, and that there is some common ground. However, significant differences remain." In reality, no agreement emerged on Wednesday and negotiations had to be extended to a second, unplanned day to ensure that discussions continued.

The stakes are high. The US and the EU are preparing to implement harsh new sanctions on Iran at the end of June that will drastically reduce oil exports on which Tehran is economically dependent. At the same time, the US and Israel continue to threaten unprovoked military attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Following the end of the talks yesterday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton immediately put the onus on Iran to make concessions at the Moscow meeting. Referring to the divisions between the two sides, she declared: "We think that the choice is now Iran's to work to close the gaps."

Clinton also made clear that the US had no intention of softening its economic penalties against Iran, saying: "All of our sanctions will remain in place and continue to move forward during this period." The refusal of the US and EU to ease existing sanctions or postpone the imposition of new ones was a major obstacle to reaching any deal with Iran.

The negotiations in Baghdad focussed on proposals primarily drawn up by the US and EU for initial "confidence building" steps by the Iranian regime. These included a halt of uranium enrichment to the level of 20 percent, the shipment of its 20 percent enriched uranium out of the country and the closure of the Fordo underground enrichment plant near the city of Qom.

All of these demands involve significant compromises by Tehran, which insists that it has no plans to build nuclear weapons and has the right under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) to engage in all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium enrichment. In return, the US and EU offered virtually nothing: a promise of no new sanctions beyond those already imposed and announced, assistance with nuclear safety, and access to badly-needed commercial aircraft spare parts.

The Iranian negotiating team had indicated that it was willing to discuss issues concerning the 20 percent enriched uranium, but obviously wanted concessions in return. Iran needs 20 percent enriched uranium to fuel the research reactor in Tehran that produces medical isotopes and low-enriched uranium (3.5 percent) for its power reactor. Highly enriched uranium (90 percent) is required to build a nuclear weapon.

However, Iran's chief negotiator Saeed Jalili told the media that Tehran would not make any concessions unless the P5+1 accepted "the undeniable right of the Iranian nation ... to enrich uranium." The US has flatly ruled out allowing Iran to enrich uranium to any level, despite the process being permitted under the NPT.

As reported by the *Telegraph*, Iranian officials

expressed their disappointment that Ashton's proposals contained no "concrete" concessions to Tehran and criticised the talks as time-wasting. "This is not a serious extension of what we discussed in Istanbul [at the first round of talks in April] that offered a step-by-step process," an Iranian delegate said. Iran offered its own five-point proposal that was effectively ignored by the P5+1.

The *Guardian* reported that the talks had virtually collapsed late yesterday with no agreement for additional negotiations. "Ashton, and the Russian and Chinese delegations, held separate meetings with the Iranian negotiator in the late afternoon to persuade him to agree to a further round in Moscow on June 18. His [Jalali's] agreement was only evident in the dying minutes of the last plenary session."

The last minute arrangement only postpones what appears to be an inevitable breakdown of negotiations. Even if a deal is reached in Moscow on so-called confidence building steps, the Obama administration has already made clear that it requires nothing less than a complete capitulation by Tehran to all of the US demands. As Clinton explained, the US has "a dual-track approach"—negotiations, or rather ultimatums, proceed alongside preparations for crippling sanctions and war.

In the midst of the Baghdad talks, Israel continued to voice its demand for a complete shutdown of Iran's entire enrichment program and its threat of war. On Wednesday, Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Moshe Yaalon provocatively warned: "The sanctions must continue and tighten, alongside international seclusion, support of the [Iranian] opposition and a reliable military option."

"If all this does not help," Yaalon added, "someone might have to instigate a military move against Iran."

The ongoing threats by Israel and the US to take unilateral military action against Iran, in open breach of international law, underline the utter hypocrisy surrounding the talks. While demanding that Iran dismantle its nuclear facilities, Washington remains completely silent on the arsenal of nuclear weapons

stockpiled by its ally Israel, which, unlike Iran, refuses to sign the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty or allow any international inspections.

Washington's two-faced stance makes clear that it is not primarily concerned about Iran's capacity to build nuclear weapons. Rather the escalating confrontation, like the previous US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, is aimed at fashioning a regime in Tehran that is more amenable to US ambitions for dominance in the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

In doing so, the Obama administration is threatening a dangerous new war that could potentially set the entire region aflame.



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