

Tensions with Iran rise after failed Baghdad talks

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The prospect of harsh new international sanctions leading to increased tensions and the likelihood of war against Iran increased markedly after the failure of talks last week in Baghdad between the P5+1 group—the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany—and Iran over the country’s nuclear programs.

The meeting began last Wednesday and was extended for a day, but broke up without any agreement other than a decision to hold a further round of talks next month in Moscow. European Union (EU) foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton presented what amounted to a US/EU ultimatum to Iran to halt production of 20 percent-enriched uranium, ship its stockpile out of the country and shut its Fordow enrichment plant.

The bitterness of Iranian officials was palpable. Atomic Energy Agency chief Fereydoon Abbasi told a news conference on Sunday: “We are enriching uranium based on our country’s needs and we will not ask anyone’s permission to do so. The Iranian negotiating team will not budge if the other side continues talking this way.”

With the prospect of a deal in Baghdad, Tehran had hinted it would be prepared to compromise on enrichment to 20 percent. Following the talks, Abbasi said: “We have no reason to retreat from producing the 20 percent because we need 20 percent just as much to meet our needs.” Iran has already transformed some of its stockpile into fuel plates for a research reactor in Tehran that produces medical isotopes.

Abbasi also announced that Iran would begin the construction of two new nuclear power plants next

year. The refusal of the US to recognise Iran’s right to manufacture low-enriched uranium for its power reactors was a significant factor in the breakdown of the Baghdad talks. The US and the EU also refused to hold off on sanctions, due to take effect July 1, that will severely inhibit Iranian oil exports. All that Iran was offered was access to spare parts for civilian aircraft and assistance on nuclear safety issues.

Abbasi also called into question a deal struck last week with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief Yukiya Amano on procedures to settle what the IAEA claims are “possible military dimensions” of Iran’s nuclear program. Amano had sought access to the Parchin military base, but Abbasi insisted that the IAEA would have to produce documents showing that Iran had conducted illegal activity at the site. The IAEA’s only evidence comes from dubious intelligence reports, probably from Israel and the US, which refuse to allow documents to be shown to Iran.

The Iranian regime insists that it has no plans to build a nuclear weapon. All of its nuclear facilities are under IAEA inspection and the latest IAEA report published last Friday confirms “the non-diversion of declared nuclear material at the nuclear facilities” to non-peaceful purposes.

US and international media reports highlighted the fact that IAEA inspectors had found traces of uranium enriched to 27 percent—higher than the stated level of 20 percent—and implied that Iran could be seeking to produce weapons-grade enriched uranium. Iranian officials dismissed the result as a technical glitch. What the incident does demonstrate is that IAEA inspections

would rapidly detect any signs of the 90 percent enriched uranium needed to build a nuclear weapon.

Iran's reluctance to agree to more invasive IAEA inspections, including at the Parchin site, is understandable. A decade ago, the Iraqi regime bowed to US demands for weapons inspections, only to be confronted with new accusations and ever more intrusive demands for access, including to military bases and presidential palaces. None of this stopped the US-led invasion in 2003, which failed to uncover any weapons of mass destruction.

Obviously concerned about widespread anti-war sentiment, a *Financial Times* editorial last weekend attempted to draw a distinction between the lies used to justify the war on Iraq and the current confrontation with Iran. "Eight years ago, the US and UK rushed into a war against Iraq, without evidence that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction. This time, it is different," the newspaper declared.

In fact, the "evidence" that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons is just as doubtful as in the case of Iraq. The IAEA's allegations about "possible military dimensions" rely on US and Israeli intelligence that Iran has dismissed as fraudulent and that refer, in any case, to programs that mostly ended nearly a decade ago. The vague and unsubstantiated claims are designed to provide the US and its allies with the pretext for sanctions and war. The US is not primarily concerned about Iran's nuclear programs, but rather is seeking to replace the current regime with one more in line with US ambitions for domination of the energy-rich Middle East.

Speaking on Sunday to ABC News, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta confirmed that the US was "not going to allow Iran to develop a nuclear weapon." He added provocatively, "Make no mistake about it, we will prevent them from developing a nuclear weapon."

Asked about comments last week by the US ambassador to Israel that the Pentagon had made all the preparations necessary to attack Iran, Panetta declared simply that "we have plans to be able to implement [in] any contingency."

Following the Baghdad talks, US Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman headed to Israel over the weekend for discussions with senior Israeli leaders, who are calling on the US and its allies to put tougher demands to Iran. Speaking to *Ha'aretz*, a senior Israeli official was dismissive of the negotiations, claiming that Iran had simply used them "to gain time."

Any differences between the US and Israel are purely tactical. Both countries have made advanced preparations for an unprovoked military attack on Iran and have warned in recent weeks that the door is closing for a negotiated solution. In reality, the talks are the means for delivering an ultimatum to Iran to capitulate across the board or face crippling sanctions and war.



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