

IAEA talks on Iran's nuclear program collapse

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Talks between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) broke up on Friday with no agreement on procedures for examining alleged military aspects of Iran's nuclear program and no more meetings planned. The failure of the talks sets the stage for a breakdown of the broader international negotiations next week in Moscow.

IAEA chief Yukiya Amano, who last month announced a tentative deal with Iran, declared he could not be optimistic after the meeting ended “without any progress” and “some setbacks”. The IAEA had been demanding access to Iranian facilities, nuclear personnel and documents, in particular the Parchin military base.

Tehran insists that it has no plans to construct a nuclear weapon and has dismissed IAEA's claims about “possible military dimensions” to its nuclear program as being based on “forged and fabricated” evidence. The IAEA allegations rely heavily on information provided by foreign intelligence agencies, especially those of the US and Israel.

Iran's IAEA ambassador Ali Ashgar Soltanieh pointed to the reason for the breakdown of the talks when he declared the Parchin issue had been “politicised” by Western powers which sought to create obstacles to a deal with the IAEA. The Parchin military base has no nuclear facilities and is therefore not subject to inspection, but the IAEA claims it might have been the site for conventional explosive testing need to build the trigger for a nuclear weapon.

Prior to the last month's negotiations in Baghdad with the P5+1 (the US, Britain, France, Russia, China

and Germany), Iran had hinted that it would allow access to Parchin and consider other concessions on its nuclear program. However, the intransigent stance taken by the US and its European allies ensured the near breakdown of those talks.

Iran was confronted with a series of ultimatums, including the suspension of uranium enrichment to the 20 percent level, the shipment of its stockpile of 20 percent-enriched uranium out of the country, and the closure of its Fordow enrichment plant. In return for these “confidence building measures”, Tehran was offered virtually nothing: spare parts for its commercial aircraft and a promise that no additional sanctions would be announced.

Iranian negotiators had been pressing for recognition of its right under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) to produce low-enriched uranium to fuel its power reactor. The US has made clear, however, that the “confidence building” was only the first step to demanding the ending of all uranium enrichment. All of these enrichment levels are far less than the 90 percent required for a nuclear weapon and are permitted under the NPT.

The only agreement reached at the Baghdad meeting last month was a last-minute proposal to hold further talks, due to take place in Moscow next week. The Obama administration has already made clear, however, that it is not prepared to make any concessions. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared last week that Tehran had to “take concrete steps”—in other words, accept Washington's demands.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad summed

up Tehran's attitude when he stated recently: "If some want us to forgo this right [to enrich uranium], they should first give their reasons, and secondly [disclose] what they will give the Iranian nation in return."

In particular, Iran is seeking a delay in US and European Union (EU) sanctions that will severely limit the oil exports on which Iran is heavily dependent economically. The US and EU have indicated that the sanctions will go ahead at the end of this month regardless of any deal reached in Moscow.

Wrangling over the preparation for the Moscow negotiations suggests that both sides are already preparing to blame the other for their failure. According to the *New York Times*, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalali wrote to EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton last week, declaring that "the EU failure" to arrange meetings to discuss the agenda had "created an atmosphere of doubt and ambiguity for success of the Moscow talks." In turn, Ashton's deputy Helga Schmid blamed Iranian negotiators for focussing on procedure rather than matters of substance.

If the Moscow talks collapse, as appears likely, the chief responsibility rests with the Obama administration. From the outset it has been seeking nothing less than a complete capitulation by Tehran. The US is exploiting Iran's nuclear programs as a pretext for a far broader campaign aimed at establishing a regime in Tehran more in line with American ambitions to secure a dominant position in the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

President Obama has repeatedly declared that "all options are on the table", including an unprovoked military attack on Iran. In recent months, the Pentagon has been building up its military capacity in the Persian Gulf, including the stationing of two aircraft carrier battle groups in the region. US officials have warned ominously that the time for negotiations is running out.

US Treasury Undersecretary David Cohen told the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* last week that if the Moscow talks collapsed, "there is no question we will continue to ratchet up the pressure" on Iran. He said that Israel and the US were considering unspecified

new measures following the imposition of oil sanctions from July 1.

Israel's military chief-of-staff Lieutenant General Benny Gantz underlined the possibility of strikes last week when he said that a "super-ready" military threat was needed in tandem with diplomatic moves. He also hinted at other "disturbances" to Iran's nuclear program. Israel, in conjunction with the US, is widely believed to have been responsible the killing of top-level Iranian nuclear scientists and cyberwarfare attacks on Iranian nuclear installations over the past three years.

Speaking at a security conference in Israel recently, former US defence undersecretary Michele Flournoy assured her audience that the US was militarily prepared for an attack on Iran. "When the president said all options are on the table, let me assure you that those options are real and viable," she declared. "Having sat in the Pentagon and spent a lot of time on this issue, I can assure you of the quality of that work." Flournoy resigned her post in February to work on Obama's re-election campaign.

The US-led confrontation with Iran has reached a dangerous turning point. With the likely failure of next week's talks, the US and its allies are poised to recklessly escalate tensions through the imposition of crippling economic sanctions and, if they fail to bring Tehran to its knees, the launching of a catastrophic new war.



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