

# International talks on Iran's nuclear program fail

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The effective collapse of international talks in Moscow this week over Iran's nuclear programs opens up a dangerous new chapter in the escalating US-led confrontation with the Iranian regime. Harsher sanctions are due to be imposed on Iran on July 1 amid menacing threats of military attacks by the US and Israel.

Negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 group—the US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany—began in Istanbul in April. A further round of talks took place last month in Baghdad, but reached no agreement. There was a last-minute deal to continue discussions in Moscow this week.

The Moscow meeting broke up with no further negotiations planned. As a face-saving device, it was agreed to hold a low-level technical meeting in Istanbul on July 3. But the lack of any agreement over fundamental issues virtually ensures that next month's gathering will fail in its goal of discussing the basis for further talks.

The Obama administration has refused to compromise on what was in fact an ultimatum to Iran: end its enrichment of uranium to the 20 percent level, export its stockpile of that uranium and shut down its Fordow enrichment plant. Moreover, Washington has made clear that these “confidence building steps” will be followed by further demands, including ending uranium enrichment to any level.

At the Moscow talks, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili reiterated his country's right, as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to engage in all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle—including

uranium enrichment for peaceful purposes. Iran enriches uranium to 3.5 percent for its power reactor and 20 percent for a research reactor in Tehran used to produce medical isotopes. In both cases, the enriched uranium is well short of the 90 percent level required to manufacture a nuclear weapon.

EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton—the lead negotiator for the P5+1 group—declared that the Moscow discussions had been “detailed, tough and frank exchanges.” There remained “significant gaps between the substance of the two positions.” In reality, the gulf between the two sides was as wide as when the talks began.

Ashton made clear that talks would proceed only if Iran agreed to the package of “confidence building steps.” “The choice is Iran's,” she bluntly declared. The US and its allies have offered virtually nothing in return—spare parts for commercial aircraft, fuel plates for the Tehran research reactor and a vague promise that sanctions could be eased in the future. Washington has refused to recognise Iran's right to enrich uranium and is proceeding with expanded sanctions on July 1.

American analyst and academic Vali Nasr explained to the *New York Times* that Iran “has to give up substantial things—trump cards—for talks to proceed substantively, and it needs serious concessions in return.” But, as Nasr noted, the six powers were “not ready to give them.”

The Obama administration's refusal to compromise underlines the bogus character of the “negotiating” process. The US is in fact demanding the capitulation of the Iranian regime, not only on the initial demands,

but the ones that will inevitably follow. Washington is exploiting the nuclear issue as the means for exerting intense pressure on Iran to fashion a regime more advantageous to US strategic and economic interests.

As of July 1, US and EU sanctions will slash Iranian oil exports, compounding the crisis confronting the Iranian economy and placing new burdens on working people. The EU will enforce an embargo on all imports of Iranian oil to Europe—one of Iran’s largest customers—and ban European-based insurance companies from covering Iranian cargoes to other parts of the world. The oil embargo alone will cost Iran an estimated \$4.5 billion a month in lost revenues.

The insurance ban will impact Iran’s oil exports, as most maritime insurers are based in Europe. While the Japanese government has announced its own guarantees on insurance, South Korean officials told the Yonhap news agency yesterday that the expanded EU sanctions would force them to halt the purchase of Iranian oil.

The US sanctions are even more sweeping, threatening to penalise any foreign corporation or bank doing business with Iran’s central bank. The enabling legislation has provided the US administration with the power to issue waivers to countries that have taken steps to wind back oil imports from Iran. Obama has applied the waiver selectively to close allies such as Japan and South Korea, while so far refusing to issue one to China.

The imposition of the new US and EU sanctions will heighten tensions with Iran and throughout the Middle East. The mounting economic penalties on Iran take place alongside a steady drum beat of threats to launch unprovoked military attacks. The US has steadily built up its forces in the Persian Gulf, including by positioning two aircraft carrier battle groups in the region and stationing advanced F-22 Raptor stealth fighter-bombers in the United Arab Emirates.

Israel has continued to threaten air strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities. Following the breakup of the Moscow talks, Israeli Vice Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz warned a think tank forum in Washington that time was short. “There is no way Israel will accept a nuclear

Iran,” he said. “Just because you have tougher sanctions doesn’t mean we have four or five months. We have limited time.”

Mofaz said the use of military power should be the last option, adding that it should be led by the US and Western countries. He indicated, however, that Israel would use military force against Iran if “we see no one is going to act and there is no other option.” The Israeli military, like its American counterpart, has made advanced preparations for attacking Iran.

Mofaz is head of the Kadima party, which recently joined the ruling coalition headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Mofaz is generally regarded as a moderate. Netanyahu and Defence Minister Ehud Barak have previously made far more belligerent statements, threatening air strikes on Iran.

The Obama administration’s aggressive stance toward Iran threatens to trigger a war that would engulf the Middle East and draw in the major powers.



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