

US imposes new sanctions on Iran prior to international talks

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International talks with Iran on its nuclear program announced on Tuesday are virtually dead in the water before they even commence in Kazakhstan on February 26. The P5+1 group—the US, France, Britain, Russia, China and Germany—has made clear in advance that its “offer” will be only slightly revised from the one flatly rejected by Iran last year.

The US is insisting that Iran end uranium enrichment to the 20 percent level, ship its stockpile of such material out of the country and shut down its enrichment plant at Fordow. Iran has repeatedly rejected Western claims that it is planning to build nuclear weapons and insists that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. It has signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and its nuclear facilities are all subject to international monitoring and inspection.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague declared that Iran would be presented with an “updated and credible offer”, but provided no details. Speaking to the *New York Times*, a European official described the package of economic incentives as “a marginally different formula.” As well as the airplane parts and nuclear safety aid contained in the previous package, Tehran would be offered a limited easing of sanctions, but not of the crippling oil embargo.

The Obama administration’s attitude to the talks was highlighted on Wednesday when the US Treasury Department announced a new raft of sanctions against Iran. As well as banking and financial sanctions coming into force that compel Tehran to enter barter arrangements to sell its oil, the US has targetted a number of other Iranian entities. Washington has used the P5+1 talks all along as a forum for delivering ultimatums to Tehran to accept American terms or face the prospect of harsher sanctions and military attack.

The US Treasury has added to its blacklist the Islamic

Republic of Iran Broadcasting company and its director, Iran’s Communications Regulatory Authority that polices the Internet, and Iran Electronics Industries, said to be a producer of “goods and services related to jamming, monitoring and eavesdropping.”

The targetting of these Iranian companies and bodies, which have nothing to do with the country’s nuclear program, is clearly aimed at politically undermining and destabilising the Iranian regime. Under the phony banner of “human rights”, the Obama administration is seeking to aid those opposition groups that it backed in the 2009 “Green Revolution,” which was aimed at removing the re-elected president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The US is hoping to exploit the rancorous divisions in Iranian ruling circles, not only between so-called “conservatives” and “liberals”, but within the conservative camp, in the lead-up to the presidential election in June. Iran’s nuclear program and “human rights” are simply the pretext for on-going efforts to fashion a regime in Tehran supportive of US strategic and economic interests in the Middle East and Central Asia.

On Thursday, Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, rejected the idea of bilateral talks with the US, which had been hinted at by US Vice President Joseph Biden at security talks in Munich last weekend. Speaking to Iranian air force personnel, Khamenei declared: “The Iranian nation will not negotiate under pressure. The US is pointing a gun at Iran and wants us to talk to them. The Iranian nation will not be intimidated by these actions.”

The supreme leader, who controls foreign and defence policies, also took a political swipe at President Ahmadinejad, declaring that those in Iran who wanted bilateral talks were “simple-minded.” Ahmadinejad and

his foreign minister had both publicly supported negotiations with Washington. Bitter political feuding between supporters of Khamenei and of Ahmadinejad is intensifying in the lead-up to the presidential poll. (See: “Iranian president publicly accuses rivals of corruption”).

US-led sanctions on Iran, especially the embargo on the sale of oil, are having a devastating impact on its economy and population. Iranian oil exports, the mainstay of the economy and government revenues, have plunged by 50 percent over the past year and the value of the currency has more than halved. As a result, inflation is skyrocketing and unemployment is on the rise, as factories are forced to shut down.

While the US claims that humanitarian goods are exempted from sanctions, hundreds of thousands of people have no access to vital drugs, including for the treatment of cancer. Some drug companies will not sell to Iran out of fear that their products will be branded as “dual-use” chemicals by the US. “Sometimes companies agree to sell us drugs but we have no way of paying for them. On one occasion, our money was in the bank for four months, but the transfer repeatedly got rejected,” Naser Naghdi, the director general of Iran’s largest pharmaceutical company, told the *Guardian* last month.

As well as crippling economic sanctions, the US continues to prepare for war against Iran. Under the umbrella of the American-led Proliferation Security Initiative, military and other personnel from 29 nations took part in exercises this week aimed at “interdicting” shipments of so-called weapons of mass destruction. Pointedly, this year’s exercise was held in Abu Dhabi, across the Persian Gulf from Iran.

The US Central Command announced this week that it was scheduling another major mine-sweeping practice in the Persian Gulf in May, involving the navies of more than 20 nations. The aim of the exercise is to test the ability of the US and its allies to neutralise any attempt by Iran to block the vital Gulf of Hormuz in retaliation for an American or Israeli attack.

The Pentagon also announced this week that it would reduce the number of its aircraft carrier battle groups from two to one, citing budget constraints. At the same time, an American official told Fox News that the US navy would be “surge-ready” to deploy more aircraft carriers to the area in the event of a crisis.

Following the announcement of P5+1 talks on Tuesday, British Foreign Secretary Hague warned: “The need to make progress is increasingly urgent.” In other words, unless Iranian leaders unconditionally accept American demands, the Obama administration will step up its war preparations against Iran.



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