

Talks on Iran's nuclear program reach no agreement

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International talks between Iran and the P5+1 group—the permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany—broke up yesterday without any agreement to ease the US-led confrontation over the Iranian nuclear program.

At the two-day meeting in Almaty in Kazakhstan, the major powers presented Iran with a slightly modified version of the proposal that it rejected last year. In return for minor concessions on what amounts to an economic blockade of the country, they insisted last year that Iran shut down its uranium enrichment plant at Fordow, cease production of 20 percent enriched uranium, and ship its stockpile of that material out of the country.

The US-backed offer presented on Tuesday called for the suspension, rather than shut down, of the Fordow plant, and permitted Iran to retain sufficient 20 percent enriched uranium to fuel its research reactor in Tehran, which manufactures medical isotopes. At the same time, however, the proposal demanded closer International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring of Iran's nuclear facilities. An additional “carrot” was added—the suspension of bans on trade in gold and petrochemical products, but not the far harsher sanctions on Iran's banking and finance sector, and on oil exports.

Iran's chief negotiator Saeed Jalali described the negotiations as “a positive step” and the proposal as “more realistic,” but US and European diplomats were less enthusiastic, noting that no concrete agreement had been reached. The only significant decision made was to hold technical talks in Istanbul on March 18 and further international negotiations in Almaty on April 5-6.

Similar talks last year, involving meetings in Istanbul, Baghdad and Moscow, collapsed in June when it

became clear to Iran that the US-backed proposal was in fact an ultimatum that was not subject to negotiation. Since then, the US and its European allies have dramatically escalated economic sanctions on Iran, including tough restrictions on oil exports, on which the Iranian economy and government finances depend heavily.

Even if Tehran were to agree to the latest offer in full, it would only open the door to further demands for an end to uranium enrichment and the shutdown of key nuclear facilities, accompanied by on-going US threats. Washington's prime concern is not Iran's nuclear programs, but the fashioning of a regime in Tehran in line with American ambitions to dominate the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

The US-led sanctions regime has already had a devastating impact on the Iranian population. The official inflation rate jumped from 12 percent in October 2010 to 27.4 percent in December 2012, but price rises for basic food staples are far higher. The country's oil exports have plunged by about 40 percent, causing sharp falls in the value of the currency, destabilising the economy and leading to factory closures. Unemployment and underemployment, already widespread, are rising.

The Obama administration has no intention of significantly easing the economic blockade of Iran. In fact, the talks in Almaty took place amid threats of further punitive economic measures and the menace of military strikes.

Earlier this month, the US Treasury Department announced new sanctions on Iran's banking and financial sector, and targeted more Iranian entities, including the country's main broadcaster and its communications regulatory authority, neither of which has any connection to Iran's nuclear agencies. On

Monday, a group of 36 US senators wrote to the European Council calling for the European Central Bank to prevent Iran from trading in euros.

Newly-installed US Secretary of State John Kerry this week again warned Iran that “the window for a diplomatic solution simply cannot remain open forever.” He offered to hold direct US talks with Iran. But Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has ruled out such discussions, saying Iran will not negotiate with the US pointing a gun at it.

Kerry warned that “terrible consequences could follow failure” of the talks. The Obama administration has maintained the constant threat of war against Iran, repeatedly declaring that “all options are on the table.” The Pentagon has systematically prepared for attacks on Iran by building up US military forces in the Persian Gulf and strengthening the defences of its regional allies, including Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.

The US Central Command announced this month that another major mine-sweeping exercise, involving more than 20 nations, will take place in the Persian Gulf in May. While Washington claims such military manoeuvres are “defensive,” the aim is to neutralise any attempt by Iran to block the Gulf of Hormuz in retaliation for a pre-emptive attack by the US or Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared yesterday: “I believe it is incumbent upon the international community to intensify the sanctions and clarify that if Iran continues its [nuclear] program, there will be military sanctions.” By “military sanctions,” Netanyahu only means one thing: the launching of devastating attacks on Iran’s nuclear facilities, military and infrastructure.

The Obama administration has not publicly indicated when the “window of opportunity” for talks could close. President Obama is due to visit Israel next month. According to a report on Israel’s Channel 10 television on Monday, Obama will tell Netanyahu that the “window of opportunity” for military strikes on Iran will open in June, and urge Israel to “sit tight” until then.

The Channel 10 report may be nothing more than unsubstantiated speculation within Israeli political, military and intelligence circles. But the reported deadline does coincide with Netanyahu’s declaration at the UN last September that action needed to be taken

by mid-2013 to prevent Iran having the potential to build a nuclear weapon.

Iran has repeatedly denied any plans to construct a nuclear arsenal. Regardless of the exact timing, what is being discussed in the US and Israel is another criminal act of aggression that could plunge the entire Middle East into war and draw in the major powers.



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