

International talks on Iran's nuclear program fail

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International talks in Kazakhstan between Iran and the P5+1 group (the US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany) broke up on Saturday with no agreement and no immediate proposal for further negotiations. The failure of the talks heightens the danger of rising tensions, further sanctions and US-led military attacks on Iran.

The negotiators attempted to put a positive spin on the outcome. European Union (EU) foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton declared that there had been “a real back and forth” in the talks and said she would speak to Iran’s chief negotiator Saeed Jalali “in order to see how to go forward”. But she acknowledged that, after two days of discussion, the sides “remain far apart on substance”.

An unnamed US official told the *New York Times*: “There may not have been a breakthrough, but there also was not a breakdown.” However, he warned: “International pressure continues and will only increase if Iran is not responsive.” In a similar vein, British Foreign Secretary William Hague threatened Iran with “increasing pressure and isolation from the international community”.

The collapse of talks was no surprise. The US and its allies made only minor modifications to a proposal made during a similar round of failed talks last year. Washington’s “offer” is in reality an ultimatum to Tehran to halt its production of enriched uranium to the 20-percent level, shut down its Fordow enrichment plant and ship its stockpile out of the country.

The modifications would allow Iran to suspend, rather than shut down, operations at Fordow, and retain a small proportion of 20-percent enriched uranium to fuel a research reactor in Tehran that produces medical isotopes. These “confidence building” steps are just the first, as Washington is demanding that Iran halt all

uranium enrichment, including to provide fuel for its power reactor.

The Iranian regime, which has repeatedly rejected allegations that it is seeking to build nuclear weapons, has signed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and its nuclear facilities are subject to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections. Iranian negotiators reportedly insisted that the P5+1 spell out its plans, saying “unless we know the destination, we’re not going to take the first step.”

Over the past four years, the Obama administration has imposed crippling economic sanctions, both through the UN Security Council and unilaterally. By threatening to penalise purchasers, including China and India, the US restricted Iran’s ability to sell its oil, resulting in a drop of about 40 percent in exports and hitting its economy hard. The official inflation rate is continuing to rise, reaching an annualised 31.5 percent in March. Actual price increases, including for food staples, are far higher.

The British-based *Guardian* reported last month that Iranian doctors are facing serious shortages of essential medicines, including anaesthetics, as a result of international sanctions. Kheirollah Gholami, a pharmacist from the Tehran University of Medical Sciences, told the newspaper: “If these drugs are not supplied, our operating theatres will have to close ... If you don’t have anaesthetics, patients in need of operations may simply die.”

If Iran winds back its uranium enrichment program, the P5+1 is offering little in return: a promise of no additional penalties, permission to trade in gold and other precious metals, and an easing of sanctions on the petrochemical industry. All the major penalties, including on the oil exports on which the economy depends, are to remain in place. Not surprisingly, Iran

is demanding greater concessions.

In the wake of the talks, US Secretary of State John Kerry again warned Iran that negotiations were not “interminable”. Speaking in Istanbul at the start of a Middle Eastern trip, Kerry said: “This is not an endless process. You can’t just talk for the sake of talking.”

Kerry’s comments constitute another threat that the US is not only prepared to impose even harsher sanctions, but to launch a pre-emptive war against Iran. Obama declared again in Israel last month that all options, including military force, were on the table. His administration has built up military forces in the Persian Gulf, as well as consolidated alliances with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, in preparation for such a war.

Washington’s main aim is not the elimination of Iran’s nuclear programs, but the establishment of a regime in Tehran in line with US economic and strategic interests. As well as having its own huge reserves of oil and gas, Iran is strategically located between the energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East, and is thus central to US imperialism’s ambition to dominate the region.

Obama is also seeking to reassure Israel, America’s key ally in the Middle East, that it will retain its present regional monopoly on nuclear weapons. Last year, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who also has repeatedly threatened military action against Iran, claimed that Iran would have all but completed the necessary steps to build a nuclear weapon by the middle of this year. He provided no evidence for his assertion, but his comments indicated the “red line” his government had set.

Over the weekend, Israeli Minister of Strategic Affairs Yuval Steinitz reinforced the threat, declaring: “The time has come for the world to make a more assertive stand and make it unequivocally clear to the Iranians that the negotiation games have run their course.” He called for international powers, especially the US and its European allies, to issue “a meaningful and concrete threat that also includes a brief, clear and definitive timetable.”

Speaking on Army Radio yesterday, Steinitz was even more explicit, calling for “a military threat, a form of red line or unequivocal ultimatum,” with a deadline of a “few weeks, [or] a month” for Tehran to shut down its nuclear programs. Israel’s continued demands on

the Obama administration only add to the pressure for the US to attack Iran, sooner rather than later.



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