

# US and Iranian presidents talk by telephone

Peter Symonds  
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US President Obama and Iranian President Hasan Rouhani spoke by telephone on Friday, in the first top level direct contact between the two countries since the 1979 Iranian revolution. Few details over the 15-minute conversation have been released, but Rouhani said that it “mostly focussed on the nuclear issue.” Both presidents cautiously expressed the hope that a deal to end protracted confrontation between the two countries could be reached.

The telephone call followed international talks the previous day, involving US Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif that agreed to restart stalled negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program. The previous meeting of the so-called P5+1 group (the US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany) with Iran in April in Kazakhstan broke up with no agreement and no proposal for further talks.

The Obama administration is now seeking to use the opportunity provided by the election of Rouhani in June to extract concessions from Iran. Rouhani, who campaigned on a foreign policy of moderation and dialogue, is pushing for a deal with the US to put an end to crippling US-led economic sanctions on Iran as well as the on-going threat of US military attack.

The P5+1 negotiations, which are due to begin in mid-October in Geneva, are to focus on the so-called end game—that is, what constraints Iran is prepared to accept on its nuclear program in return for the lifting international sanctions—with a one-year timetable for completion. Previous talks in Kazakhstan failed to agree on initial “confidence-building” moves.

The US already has a long list of demands, including ending Iranian uranium enrichment to the 20 percent level, the closure of Iran’s heavily-protected uranium Fordow enrichment plant, shipping 20 percent enriched uranium out of the country, and a more intrusive inspection regime. Other demands are likely to focus on the Arak heavy-water reactor which, when completed,

could produce plutonium.

Speaking on the ABC’s “This Week” program yesterday, Iranian foreign minister Zarif declared that Tehran was willing to negotiate “aspects of our enrichment program”, but pointedly added that “our right to enrich is not negotiable.” He again denied US and Israeli claims that Iran is seeking to build a nuclear weapon, saying: “We do not need military-grade uranium, that is a certainty, and we will not move in that direction.”

Iran has repeatedly insisted on its rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which it has signed, to develop nuclear programs for peaceful purposes, including the enrichment of uranium to fuel its power and research reactors. The US pushed through UN Security Council resolutions calling for Iran shut down all uranium enrichment—a demand that, if pressed, would quickly scuttle the planned negotiations.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is likely to make precisely that demand when he meets with Obama today in Washington. In comments before he left, Netanyahu dismissed “the sweet talk and offensive of smiles” by Rouhani. According to the diplomatic correspondent for Israel’s Channel One, the prime minister will tell Obama that Israel would abandon the diplomatic path if Iran’s nuclear program was not completely dismantled—an implied threat of unilateral Israeli military action against Iran.

The Israeli government is also quite capable of mounting provocations designed to poison the atmosphere for talks. In collaboration with the US, Israeli intelligence agencies not only mounted a computer virus attack on Iran’s enrichment facilities plant, but were almost certainly behind the assassination of key Iranian nuclear scientists.

As Netanyahu flew out, Israel’s domestic security agency claimed to have arrested an Iranian spy, carrying photos of the US embassy in Tel Aviv.

When Rouhani arrived back in Iran he was met with a group of about 60 protesters who hurled eggs and a shoe at his vehicle to express their opposition to his telephone call to Obama. The demonstrators were outnumbered by some 200-300 Rouhani supporters. While the protest was quite possibly organised by so-called hard-line factions of the Iranian regime, it points to the broader distrust and hostility among Iranians towards the wars and criminal activities of US imperialism in the Middle East.

However, the small size of the protest indicates that Rouhani's diplomatic initiatives are being supported, or at least tolerated, in ruling circles, including by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The key test will be the extent to which Rouhani can quickly negotiate the easing of sanctions that have halved Iran's vital oil exports and cut Iran off from the international banking and financial system.

"Beyond the extreme and optimistic excitement, the suitcase of the Iranian delegation upon its return didn't have much in it aside from a handful of promises on credit," the hard-line *Kayhan* newspaper editorialised.

The rapidity with which the crisis over Syria and the threat of US military strikes has been replaced by negotiations with Iran demonstrates that Tehran has always been Washington's chief preoccupation. Just two weeks ago, as he was announcing the US-Russia deal to dismantle Syria's chemical weapon stockpile, Obama renewed his threat of military attack on Iran, declaring: "I think what the Iranians understand is that the nuclear issue is a far larger issue for us than the chemical weapons issue, that the threat ... against Israel that a nuclear Iran poses is much closer to our core interests."

In fact, US claims that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons have always been pretexts for pursuing a far broader agenda. American imperialism has never reconciled itself to the blow struck by the ousting of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the 1979 Iranian revolution and has regarded the Islamist regime as an obstacle to its economic and strategic ambitions. Iran not only has substantial oil and gas reserves of its own, but is strategically located between the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

Just weeks ago, the US was on the verge of bombing Syria, an act of aggression that threatened to trigger a broader conflict with Syria's allies, including Iran.

Confronted with overwhelming public opposition in the US and internationally, the Obama administration was compelled to use the chemical weapons deal with Russia to carry out a temporary retreat. While, for the time being, the Obama administration is seeking to exploit the "diplomatic path" with Iran as the means to advance US interests in the Middle East, the menace of war remains.



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