

Iran offers “new beginning” in hope of some respite from punitive US-led sanctions

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Representatives of Iran and the P-6—the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the US, Britain, France, Russia and China), plus Germany—met twice yesterday for negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program. Talks are to continue today in Geneva for a second and final day.

Following the conclusion of yesterday’s formal negotiations, further impromptu talks were held. Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif met Catherine Ashton, the European Union’s top foreign policy official and the titular head of the P-6 negotiating team, while Iran’s lead nuclear negotiator, Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi Deputy, had a one-on-one encounter with his US counterpart, Under Secretary of State Wendy Sherman.

For the past decade Washington and its European allies have mounted an escalating campaign of threats and economic sanctions against Tehran on the pretext of unsubstantiated and manipulated claims that Tehran is seeking to develop nuclear weapons.

The US and Israel have repeatedly threatened military action against Iran. US think tanks with intimate ties to the Pentagon have recommended “shock and awe” campaigns aimed at destroying much of Iran’s military and infrastructure in order to thwart Tehran’s ability to respond to a strike on its nuclear facilities.

Exploiting Western control of the world banking and insurance systems, Washington, with the support of its EU allies, has imposed trade sanctions that have halved Iran’s oil exports, the source of most of its state revenues, over the past two years.

During the just concluded eight-year Presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran claimed that the sanctions were little more than a nuisance and made a show of defying Washington. But with the blessing of Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, the new

government of Hassan Rouhani has conceded the sanctions are having a devastating impact on Iran’s economy and signaled its eagerness to bargain with Washington.

Rouhani is a protégé of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who as Iran’s president in the 1990s imposed IMF restructuring and has long advocated rapprochement with the US.

While in the first instance the bargaining between Tehran and Washington takes the form of negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program, much larger issues and ultimately the political configuration of the Middle East from Afghanistan to the eastern Mediterranean are at stake.

The US has long-viewed Tehran as the principal regional obstacle to its domination of the Middle East, the world’s principal oil exporting region. With its European and Mideast allies, Washington has organized and armed the Islamist uprising against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, with the aim of depriving Iran of a close ally and a ready means of supplying Lebanon’s Hezbollah Shiite militia, a second key ally.

Iran’s bourgeois nationalist regime, for its part, has repeatedly made overtures to Washington, only to be rebuffed. Tehran tacitly supported the US invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and of Iraq in 2003. In the first instance, Washington responded by proclaiming Iran to be part of “an axis of evil,” and in the second by launching its campaign to isolate and bully Iran over its nuclear program.

Tuesday’s talks began with an hour-long PowerPoint presentation by Iran’s Foreign Minister Zarif. Titled “Closing an Unnecessary Crisis, and Opening New Horizons,” it outlined Tehran’s proposals as to how negotiations should proceed in the weeks and months

ahead.

Iran has repeatedly indicated that it expects a quick, if not immediate, easing of the sanctions in exchange for making concessions on its rights, as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to all phases of a nuclear energy program. The Obama administration, meanwhile, has suggested that any easing of the sanctions will be long drawn out and subject to “verification” of Iranian compliance.

On the eve of the Geneva talks, ten prominent US Senators, including the Democratic Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Menendez and former Republican presidential candidate John McCain, signed a letter threatening to push for speedy passage of legislation already adopted by the House of Representatives that would impose still harsher sanctions—including an end to all Iranian oil exports by 2015—if Iran does not immediately suspend all uranium enrichment.

No details of the proposal that Iran’s negotiators presented Tuesday are to be revealed until the conclusion of the talks on Wednesday.

But Iran has previously said that it is willing to provide “greater transparency” about its nuclear program so as to demonstrate that it is committed to abiding by its pledge to never develop nuclear weapons.

According to a government-run Iranian television channel, Tehran is also offering to reduce its level of uranium enrichment from the current 20 percent level.

Prior to the talks, Iran made clear that it would not comply with Western demands that it ship its existing stock of 20 percent enriched uranium out of Iran—part of a package of measures that an unnamed US official told the *New York Times* Monday would be needed “to put some time back on the clock for negotiations.”

Zarif’s presentation was welcomed by the US and its EU allies, with Ashton’s spokesman, Michael Mann, calling it “very useful.”

A second session Tuesday afternoon was devoted to what was termed “very detailed technical discussions.”

Speaking at the end of the day, Iran’s lead negotiator Araqhi said, “We had very constructive, very good exchange of views ... very businesslike. ... Tomorrow we can make a final conclusion to see if we had any progress.”

Iranian officials have indicated that they want the

negotiations to resume within a month and directly involve the foreign ministers of all the P-6 countries.

In the run-up to this week’s talks, Washington and its allies have sought to reassure Israel that any deal with Tehran will not jeopardize its strategic interests. At the beginning of the month, Obama, appearing alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, once again threatened Iran with war if it did not make sweeping concessions to Washington. Last week France’s chief negotiator for the P-6 talks with Iran and the deputy head of the British negotiating team travelled to Israel to brief Israeli officials. And over the weekend Netanyahu spoke with both French President Francois Hollande and British Prime Minister David Cameron.



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