

Further talks scheduled on Iran's nuclear programs

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Two days of international talks in Geneva on Iran's nuclear programs wound up yesterday with an agreement to hold a further meeting on November 7-8 to discuss proposals tabled by Iranian negotiators this week. The talks involved the so-called P5+1 group—the US, Britain, France, China and Russia, plus Germany—in discussions with an Iranian team led by Foreign Minister Javad Zarif.

No details of the Iranian plan, presented by Zarif on Tuesday, have been made public. However, in an unusual step, Zarif and European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, the lead P5+1 negotiator, issued a joint statement describing the talks as “substantive and forward-looking.” Ashton called the negotiations “the most detailed we have ever had by a long way.”

White House spokesman Jay Carney commented that Iran had shown “a level of seriousness and substance that we have not seen before.” A senior US administration official told the media: “I have never had such intense, detailed, straightforward, candid, conversations with the Iranian delegation people. I would say we really are beginning that type of negotiation where one could imagine that you could possibly have an agreement.”

The tone of optimism that pervades much of the press coverage is completely at odds with the gulf that exists between the two sides. The talks themselves took place under the shadow of the crippling economic sanctions imposed on Iran by the US and its European allies, and the continuing threat of military attacks by the US and Israel.

For the Obama administration, unsubstantiated US allegations that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons have been a useful pretext for an unrelenting campaign of pressure and provocation aimed ultimately

at regime-change in Tehran. For more than three decades since the 1979 Iranian revolution ousted Washington's ally, Shah Reza Pahlavi, the US has regarded Iran as the chief obstacle to its complete domination of the energy-rich Middle East.

The Iranian regime is clearly desperate for some relief from sanctions that have halved its oil exports, which are central to its economy and state revenues, leading to high inflation, rising unemployment, a collapse of its currency, and the threat of widespread social unrest. With the qualified support of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, the new government of President Hassan Rouhani has signalled its willingness to make some concessions on the country's nuclear programs.

However, Russia's deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov stated yesterday: “The positions of the Iranian side and the [P5+1] group are wide apart from each other—the distance can be measured in kilometres, while advances forward can be measured in steps—half a metre each.” While the tone had changed, “the talks were difficult, at times tense, at times unpredictable.”

While no details of the Iranian plan have been released, Iran's deputy foreign minister Abbas Aragchi indicated that it involved three steps—the first being to reach agreement on an “end game” or final resolution of the standoff. Aragchi announced before the talks that Iran would not under any circumstances give up its uranium enrichment program completely.

The US is yet to concede that Iran has a right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes, such as providing fuel for its power reactor. Washington has pushed a series of sanction resolutions through the UN Security Council demanding that Tehran end all uranium enrichment.

Aragchi has hinted that Tehran would be prepared to

limit uranium enrichment and also implement the International Atomic Energy Agency's so-called Additional Protocol, which provides for far more intrusive inspection of its nuclear facilities than currently take place. "Neither of these issues is within the first step but form part of our last steps," he told Iran's official IRNA news agency.

The deputy foreign minister also declared that he hoped to see a complete lifting of sanctions within six months. "We should reach an agreement within a limited time frame so no one gets the impression that we are just killing time," he said. Tehran has already had the bitter experience of making significant concessions in negotiations with Washington's European allies in the period 2003-05, only to be offered very little in return.

The Obama administration is obviously seeking to extract what it can from the negotiations while making few guarantees of its own. US officials have hinted that Washington might hold off on further sanctions currently before the Congress. A *Voice of America* article noted that the presence of US Treasury official Adam Szubin might indicate US willingness to open a direct US-Iran banking channel for trade in humanitarian goods such as food and medicine. This only underscores the criminal character of the US-led sanctions, which nominally exempt such goods, but in reality block their sale, because financial restrictions mean there is no method for payment.

On substantive issues, the Obama administration faces opposition in Congress and from its main partner in the Middle East, Israel. In an unusual step, Israel's top-level security cabinet issued a provocative communiqué on Tuesday calling on Iran to cease all uranium enrichment, ship all existing stockpiles of enriched uranium out of the country and dismantle or mothball its nuclear facilities. It warned against any easing of sanctions prior to these demands being implemented.

The communiqué is a recipe for ensuring the talks fail, as Iran has already ruled out ending uranium enrichment. Israel, which has a substantial arsenal of nuclear weapons, is determined to maintain its military predominance in the Middle East by ensuring that none of its rivals has even the potential to match it. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly warned that Israel could take pre-emptive military action

against Iran, as it did against Iraq in 1981 when Israeli warplanes destroyed Iraq's French-built nuclear reactor.

Moreover, the Obama administration is looking for far broader concessions from Tehran, apart from restricting its nuclear program. Having pulled back from an imminent military attack last month on Iran's ally, the Syrian regime of President Bashir al-Assad, Washington is looking toward Iran for assistance to oust Assad. To date, Tehran has rejected US preconditions for its participation in Syrian "peace talks" in Geneva, which include support for a transitional regime in Syria that excludes Assad and his close supporters.

Just over a month ago, the US and its allies were on the brink of war with Syria that threatened to draw in Iran and engulf the region. This underscores the highly tenuous nature of this week's nuclear talks. Whatever the final outcome of the negotiations, the overriding aim of US imperialism remains the same—to secure its untrammelled dominance over the Middle East at the expense of its rivals by all means, including military force.



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