

# US vows to enforce punitive sanctions until Iran brought to heel

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Through public statements and not-for-attribution media briefings, the Obama administration has served notice that the US intends to keep in place the punitive economic sanctions that it and its European allies have imposed on Iran, even as it extracts concession after concession from Tehran over its nuclear program—the sanctions’ ostensible target.

Treasury Secretary Jack Lew recently told NBC it was “premature” to even talk of easing, let alone ending, the sanctions. Lew said that Iran would not only have to agree to “rolling back” its nuclear program. There would not be any relaxing of the sanctions until Washington had “real, tangible evidence” that Iran has given up the “capacity” to develop nuclear weapons. “We will not,” declared Lew, “make moves on the sanctions until we see those kinds of moves.”

Iranian authorities have repeatedly vowed that they do not seek and never will develop nuclear weapons. Moreover, US intelligence agencies have long admitted that they have no evidence Tehran has a nuclear weapons program.

When the Obama administration speaks of eliminating Iran’s “capacity” to develop nuclear weapons, what it means is that Tehran must dismantle much of its civilian nuclear program; forego many of its rights as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to a full-cycle nuclear program; and accept an intrusive inspections regime covering all its nuclear and military facilities. In the past, the US has made even negotiations with Iran on the nuclear dispute contingent on Tehran ceasing all uranium enrichment, shipping out of the country its current stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium, and stopping work on a new nuclear reactor.

The US vow to maintain the sanctions goes alongside

repeated affirmations by Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry and other administration officials that should diplomacy not produce sufficient concessions from Iran “all options”—i.e., war—“remain on the table.”

In his NBC interview, Lew boasted about the devastating impact of sanctions on Iran’s economy. Through their effective control of the world banking system, Washington and the European Union have choked off Iran’s trade. Oil exports, which provide the bulk of state revenues, have been more than halved since 2011, the cost of imports has risen sharply, and Iran’s currency, the rial, has depreciated in the past 18 months by more than a third.

The resulting economic crisis has made it increasingly impossible for Iran’s bourgeois nationalist regime to sustain public services and price subsidies. It is having to dismantle what remains of the concessions that it made to working people as it consolidated its rule in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution through the brutal repression of the left and all independent working class organizations.

Fearing the possibility of working class unrest, Iran’s new government, with the approval of the country’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, is seeking a way to reach an accommodation with the US. In the first instance this has involved Tehran offering to make concessions to the US and its allies on the nuclear issue. However, by citing the role they played in helping the US put together Afghanistan’s Hamid Karzai-led puppet at the December 2001 Berlin Conference, Iran’s rulers have signaled that they are ready to assist the US in reordering Central Asia and Middle East. Led by President Hassan Rouhani, Iran’s new government has also indicated that it is eager to throw open Iran’s oil and natural gas industries to the US and European energy giants.

The US and its European allies have cautiously welcomed Iran's overtures. Earlier this month, Iran presented its proposals for both ending the nuclear dispute and a series of interim "confidence building" measures to negotiators for the P-6 group—the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany. Sufficient progress was made to enable further talks in Geneva on November 7-8. And, in what has been interpreted as a sign of progress toward ending the nuclear standoff, Iranian and International Atomic Energy Agency officials published a joint communiqué at the conclusion of two days of talks yesterday.

Desperate to escape the punitive sanctions and fearful of opposition to its rapprochement with Washington both from rival sections of the Islamic Republic's ruling elite and the working class, the Rouhani government has said that it aims to make major progress in resolving the nuclear dispute by the end of the Persian year, i.e., March 20.

Washington, for its part, intends to ruthlessly press the advantage. Reporting on the debate within the Obama administration over how to bring Iran to heel, the *New York Times* confirmed that the administration is determined to resist Iranian pleas for relaxation of the sanctions. This is both because of their potency and because the US fears it would be difficult to bully other countries into reenacting and policing them once relaxed.

Instead the Obama administration is reportedly debating the merits of a scheme whereby Tehran would be "rewarded" for bowing to US demands by being granted access to some of the tens of billions of Iranian money now frozen in US and European banks.

An unnamed official, reported the *Times*, "likened the plan ... to opening and closing a financial spigot." In effect, the US is planning to bleed Iran. So long as it proves accommodating to the US, Tehran is to be granted access to its own funds in dribs and drabs, with every release subject, or at least potentially subject, to fresh US demands and haggling.

While plotting to maximize the pressure on Iran, the Obama administration is involved in negotiations with the Senate over its plans to act on a bill, passed by the House of Representatives last August, which would impose still harsher economic sanctions, with a view to blocking all Iranian oil exports by 2015.

In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations

Committee at the beginning of this month, the lead US negotiator on the Iran nuclear file, Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman, praised Congress for its raft of anti-Iran legislation, while arguing that further sanctions were premature pending the outcome of the planned talks with Iran. That remains the position of the administration.

But significant sections of the Republican and Democratic Party establishments are wary of any negotiations with Iran, and the opposition of such key traditional US allies as Israel and Saudi Arabia is further fueling this faction.

On Tuesday the *Los Angeles Times* published an op-ed piece co-signed by Dennis Ross, who from 2009 to 2011 was Obama's senior Mideast policy advisor. Under the heading, "How to Negotiate with Iran," it called on the White House to "intensify sanctions and incentivize other countries to do the same, issue more forceful and credible statements that all options are on the table, initiate new military deployments and make clear the support for Israeli military action if conducted."

Whatever their tactical differences, all sections of the US ruling elite share the common objectives of compelling Iran to forego any challenge to US hegemony over the Middle East and ultimately returning Iran to the type of neo-colonial subjugation that existed under the brutal US-backed regime of Shah Reza Pahlavi.



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