

Geneva talks to restart on Iran's nuclear program

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4 November 2013

In the lead-up to the second round of international talks this week on Iran's nuclear programs, the Obama administration is already indicating that there will be no significant reduction in US-led sanctions that are crippling the Iranian economy. This stance could rapidly lead to a breakdown of negotiations.

At the first round of talks in Geneva on October 15-16, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif tabled a proposal to members of the P5+1 group (the US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany) to end the protracted deadlock over the nuclear issue. While no details of the plan were made public, Tehran indicated that it is prepared to limit its uranium enrichment and to allow more intrusive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The revival of the stalled talks follows the election of President Hasan Rouhani, who is aligned with sections of the Iranian regime seeking a rapprochement with the West, the end of sanctions and the opening up of the country to foreign investment.

The Geneva talks were followed by a two-day meeting last week between Iranian and IAEA officials that ended in a rare joint statement describing Iran's proposals as "a constructive contribution" toward "future resolution of all outstanding issues." Acting on dubious intelligence supplied by US and Israeli agencies, the IAEA has been demanding access to Iranian scientists, documents and non-nuclear facilities, including military bases.

Having already signalled its willingness to make substantial compromises, Tehran is looking for concessions in return. Last Friday, Foreign Minister Zarif warned the West that it risked missing the chance to strike a deal. He pointed out that the US had already squandered an opportunity in 2005, when Tehran offered to limit uranium enrichment well below current

capacity, but Washington demanded zero-enrichment.

Zarif reiterated that Iran had no intention of building nuclear weapons, pointing out that "Iran has never used weapons of mass destruction." Moreover, he declared that Tehran was ready to "do everything in our negotiations with the P5+1 to ensure that even the perception that Iran has anything but peaceful intentions for its nuclear program will be removed."

Zarif and Rouhani have been criticised by hardline sections of the Iranian regime, but at this stage retain the crucial support of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Speaking to students yesterday, Khamenei defended Iran's negotiators, saying they "are on a difficult mission and nobody should weaken [them]." At the same time, he qualified his support, saying he was not optimistic about the outcome of negotiations. "We should not trust an enemy who keeps smiling and says it is willing to talk but at the same time tells us 'all options are on the table'," he said.

The US and its allies are due to respond to Iran's proposals in the Geneva talks this Thursday and Friday. The Obama administration has been lobbying Congress to temporarily hold off on imposing punishing new sanctions on Iran—a move that would likely bring negotiations to an abrupt end before they even begin. The Senate is due to consider legislation passed overwhelmingly in the House to blacklist Iran's mining and construction sectors, as well as to ban all Iranian oil exports by 2015.

Vice-President Joe Biden, Secretary of State John Kerry and Treasury Secretary Jack Lew met with Congressional leaders behind closed doors last Thursday. National Security Council spokesperson Bernadette Meehan stated: "No one is suggesting an open-ended delay for new sanctions... [but] we believe it is important for Congress to reserve its ability to

legislate for the moment when it's most effective in order to give the current P5+1 negotiations the best chance."

The Obama administration has also been urging pro-Israeli organisations such as the Anti-Defamation League and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), to hold off from lobbying Congress for tougher measures. In a statement on Saturday, AIPAC rejected reports that it had agreed to a 60-day pause.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been dismissive of the negotiations, declaring, without a shred of evidence, that Iran was simply stalling to provide time to construct a nuclear weapon. When he met with Kerry for lengthy talks on October 23, Netanyahu made clear that he expected the US to insist on a complete, not a partial, shutdown of Iran's nuclear facilities.

Speaking to *USA Today* last week, Israeli Deputy Defence Minister Danny Danon warned: "We have made it crystal clear... that Israel will not stand by and watch Iran develop weaponry that will put us, the entire Middle East and eventually the world, under an Iranian umbrella of terror." In fact, Israel, which has carried out repeated acts of aggression against its neighbours, is the only Middle Eastern country to possess a nuclear arsenal. The Israeli air strike on Syria last Thursday reinforced the message to Washington that Israel can and will attack Iran's nuclear facilities if it deems necessary.

The Obama administration has no fundamental disagreements with the Netanyahu government, but is seeking to exploit the talks to extract the maximum from Tehran, including assistance in removing Iran's ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In an interview yesterday with Israel's Channel 10, Wendy Sherman, the US lead negotiator in talks with Iran, emphasised: "We did not yet agree on anything. We did not offer any relief from

?sanctions, we have not lifted any sanctions, nothing has happened yet."

A recent *New York Times* article indicated that the Obama administration was considering allowing Iran access to tens of billions of dollars in frozen accounts, but only on a case-by-case basis. The toughest measures on Iran's oil exports and banking system, which have led to a halving of oil income, rampant

inflation and a collapse in the value of the country's currency, will remain in place. (See: "US vows to enforce punitive sanctions until Iran brought to heel").

The US has maintained the threat of military aggression if Tehran does not bow to Washington's demands. Addressing the Anti-Defamation League last Thursday, former Defence Secretary Leon Panetta declared that "we may very well have to use military force [against Iran] to back up our policy." Panetta was introduced by current Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel, who expressed his admiration for his predecessor.

While this week's negotiations in Geneva are about Iran's nuclear programs, Washington intends to use the talks as a lever to pursue its broader ambitions—to establish a client regime in Tehran as part of US plans for domination in the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.



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