

Geneva talks on Iran's nuclear programs extended

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After two days of scheduled talks, negotiations in Geneva over Iran's nuclear programs have been extended into the weekend, with the foreign ministers of the P5+1 group (the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany) flying in to try to finalise an interim agreement easing the protracted US-led confrontation with Tehran.

US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday dampened expectations of a deal. "There are important gaps to be closed... I want to emphasise: there is not an agreement at this point in time," he said on arrival in Geneva. Kerry was due to meet last night with Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif and the lead P5+1 negotiator Catherine Ashton, as well as the foreign ministers of Britain, France and Germany.

Only the broad outlines of an interim deal have been leaked to the media. Washington and its allies are insisting Iran end its enrichment of uranium to the 20 percent level, render most of its stock of that material unusable for further enrichment, not use more efficient IR-2 centrifuges for enrichment, and not activate its heavy water reactor at Arak. Tehran has repeatedly denied Western allegations that it plans to manufacture a nuclear weapon, which requires uranium enriched to 90 percent.

In return, the US is offering Iran what President Barack Obama on Thursday described as "very modest relief" from the sanctions regime that has devastated the country's economy. Iran would be given some access to the tens of billions of dollars of its oil revenues frozen in foreign bank accounts and allowed to trade in precious metals and petro-chemicals. The most crippling sanctions—on Iran's oil exports and banks—will remain in place.

In his interview with NBC News, Obama stressed that the US would keep the "sanctions architecture in

place" and would "crank the dial back up" if Iran failed to meet his administration's demands. He also insisted the military option—that is, an unprovoked US military attack—remained on the table if Tehran did not freeze its nuclear activities.

US officials have stressed that any agreement reached this weekend would be part of multi-step negotiations to put in place permanent limitations on Iran's nuclear programs, in exchange for the complete lifting of sanctions. As far as Washington is concerned, the nuclear issue is part of a far broader agenda of eliminating the Iranian regime as an obstacle to its ambitions for dominance in the Middle East and Central Asia.

However, even an interim deal in Geneva faces considerable opposition among American allies in the Middle East and in the US Congress. Before heading to Geneva yesterday, Kerry met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in an effort to offer reassurances over the agreement. Netanyahu, however, bitterly denounced the proposed agreement—both before and after the meeting.

Netanyahu branded the agreement as "a very bad deal" and urged Kerry to reconsider. Iran was getting the "deal of the century," he complained, adding: "Iran is not required to take apart even one centrifuge. But the international community is relieving sanctions on Iran for the first time in many years."

The remarks are utterly hypocritical. Israel not only has a nuclear arsenal of its own, but has carried out one unprovoked act of aggression after another over decades. The Israeli government is insisting that Iran dismantle all of its nuclear energy programs, in other words capitulate completely, prior to the lifting of any sanctions.

In a particularly menacing statement, Netanyahu

declared: “Israel is not obligated by this agreement, and Israel will do everything it needs to do to defend itself and to defend the security of its people.” Like the US, Israel has repeatedly threatened Iran with military attack. Just over a week ago, Israeli war planes struck targets inside Syria—an operation which was aimed not just at the Syrian regime, but against its ally Iran.

While Israel is unlikely to launch an all-out attack on Iran without US backing, it is quite capable of mounting provocations designed to derail any agreement. With the tacit support of Washington, Israeli intelligence agencies have for years waged a covert campaign of assassination and sabotage against Iran’s nuclear programs, including the murder of top Iranian scientists.

In condemning the proposed nuclear deal, Netanyahu added: “What I’m saying is shared by many, many in the region, whether or not they express it publicly.” While maintaining an official silence yesterday, Saudi Arabia is strongly opposed to any US rapprochement with Iran, its main regional rival. The Saudi regime is also bitter over the Obama administration’s decision in September to pull back from launching an air war on Syria. Saudi intelligence chief, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, reportedly told European diplomats late last month that his government was considering a “major shift” away from its longstanding alliance with Washington.

Any agreement in Geneva faces concerted opposition in the US Congress, where the Obama administration was forced to lobby heavily to head off the imposition of even tougher sanctions on Iran just prior to the talks. Such a show of bad faith would almost certainly have ended any prospect of an agreement even before negotiations began. On Thursday, as the talks began to get underway, Senate Banking Committee chairman Tim Johnson indicated that he would press ahead with new penalties as soon as the Geneva meeting ended.

Significant sections of the Iranian ruling class are backing the diplomatic initiative of newly-installed President Hassan Rouhani to reach a deal with Washington to end decades of economic and diplomatic isolation, and open the country up to foreign investors. While Rouhani currently has the backing of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, that could change if the US does not make any significant concessions or fails to keep its promises—as has been the case in the

past.

Rouhani was centrally involved in nuclear negotiations with the so-called EU3—Britain, France and Germany—between 2003 and 2005. As a sign of good faith, Iran shut down its uranium enrichment and allowed intrusive international inspections of its nuclear facilities, hoping for concessions from the US and its European allies in return. The arrangement collapsed after the US effectively blocked any offer of substance and then rapidly ratcheted up military threats against Iran.



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