

Geneva talks on Iran resume while war threat remains

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International talks over Iran's nuclear programs resumed in Geneva yesterday amid the strident public opposition of Israel to the agreement being discussed and the continued threat of war against Iran. Negotiators for the P5+1 group (the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany) met yesterday and talks will continue today.

The broad outline of an interim agreement involves the Iranian regime freezing much of its nuclear program in return for a limited lifting of the US-led sanctions that have devastated the country's economy. Negotiations would continue during the next six months on a more comprehensive deal involving heavy restrictions on Iran's uranium enrichment and other nuclear activities, in return for the ending of sanctions and normalisation of relations.

Israel is pressing the US and its European allies to demand the complete dismantling of Iran's nuclear facilities, including its uranium enrichment plants and heavy water reactor at Arak. Tehran has repeatedly denied unsubstantiated Western and Israeli allegations that it is seeking to build a nuclear bomb.

Speaking to CNN on Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu denounced the proposed agreement as "an exceedingly bad deal," adding that it was "no secret" that many Arab leaders held the same opinion. "To give the most dangerous regime of the 21st century the world's most dangerous weapons is a big, big mistake," he declared.

Netanyahu's statements are utterly hypocritical. Israel not only has its own stockpile of nuclear weapons, but, unlike Iran, has a long history of military aggression against its neighbours. Netanyahu hinted once again that Israel was prepared to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, saying: "We've been around for about 4,000 years, the Jewish people, and we are not

about to let ayatollahs with nuclear weapons threaten that."

In a Sunday interview with the *Financial Times*, Israel's outgoing national security chief Yaakov Amidror was more explicit, saying the Israeli military had the capacity to halt Iran's nuclear programs "for a very long time." He said the Israeli airforce had been preparing "for a few years" by conducting "very long range flights" in practice for missions against Iran.

"We are not bluffing," Amidror warned. "We are very serious—preparing ourselves for the possibility that Israel will have to defend itself by itself."

The Israeli government has publicly campaigned to block any agreement at Geneva. The previous round of negotiations on November 8-10 broke up without a deal being reached after France, at the last minute, insisted on further concessions from Iran. In Jerusalem last weekend, Netanyahu warmly welcomed visiting French President Francois Hollande, who pledged to continue France's tough stance on Iran.

The Israeli government has also pressed the US Congress to proceed with new punitive sanctions, including a ban on all Iranian oil exports—a move that would almost certainly derail the Geneva talks. After meeting with President Obama on Tuesday, a group of senior senators agreed to hold off on sanctions but drafted a letter to the administration insisting that any agreement "prevent Tehran from possessing any enrichment or reprocessing capability."

The Iranian regime has already declared unacceptable the demand that it completely give up its right under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty to enrich uranium. Yesterday, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei again expressed confidence in the government headed by President Hassan Rouhani, saying he would "not intervene in the details of these

talks.” But he warned: “There are certain red lines and limits. These have to be observed.”

Rouhani, who was installed in August, is aligned with sections of the Iranian regime that have pushed for a rapprochement with the US in order to end the sanctions and open up the country to foreign investment. Khamenei’s continued support for the talks is essential to fend off criticism from hard-line factions who are deeply suspicious of US intentions and oppose the concessions being made.

The talks in Geneva are bound up with economic and geo-political considerations that go far beyond Iran’s nuclear programs. For more than three decades, the US has sought to reverse the blow that it suffered when the 1979 Iranian revolution ousted the brutal regime of Shah Reza Pahlavi. For three decades, Washington relied on the Shah as a key prop to ensure US dominance in the Middle East and as a base of operations against the former Soviet Union.

The bourgeois Iranian regime has on more than one occasion indicated its willingness to serve US interests in the region, in return for a more prominent role for itself. During the US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush administration sought and received specific forms of assistance from Tehran, but spurned an Iranian offer in 2003 of a “grand bargain” to end the long-running confrontation between the two countries.

The prospect of such a deal is clearly being considered by the Obama administration as a means of strengthening the US position in the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as gaining access to Iranian energy supplies. Mindful of what is at stake, two influential former US national security advisers, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft, wrote to Congress this week, urging such a deal, and warning: “Should the United States fail to take this historic opportunity, we risk failing to achieve our non-proliferation goal and losing the support of allies and friends while increasing the probability of war.”

The deep hostility of Israel and other US regional allies such as Saudi Arabia to the Geneva talks is driven by concerns over shifting geo-political relations. Israel not only wants to maintain its unchallenged military dominance in the Middle East, including a monopoly of nuclear weapons, but to retain its position as number one US ally in the region.

The outcome of the present round of talks in Geneva is far from certain. Britain has joined the US in suggesting that a deal is possible. Foreign Secretary William Hague yesterday told a press conference in Istanbul that “the differences that remain between the parties are narrow” and could be bridged. He declared there was “an historic opportunity” that could “potentially set our relations with Iran on a different path.”

While the Obama administration is currently pursuing an agreement in Geneva, it has not ruled out attacking Iran. Obama has repeated stated that “all options” remain on the table.



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