

Interim agreement reached on Iran's nuclear programs

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After four days of extended international talks in Geneva, an interim deal was reached on Iran's nuclear programs early Sunday morning, setting the stage for negotiations over a longer term, comprehensive agreement.

Negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 group (the US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany) recommenced in Geneva last Wednesday, after the previous round earlier this month broke up without agreement. With the US Congress threatening to impose punitive new sanctions on Iran that could derail further talks, an agreement was sealed that effectively freezes all Iran's nuclear programs and allows for intrusive inspections in return for very limited relief from the existing crippling sanctions regime.

Under the terms of the agreement, which is to cover the next six months of talks, Iran has pledged to:

- * Not enrich uranium beyond the 5 percent level required to fuel its Bushehr power reactor and not increase the stockpile of such material.

- * Render the existing stock of 20 percent enriched uranium unusable for further enrichment, either by turning it into fuel for its Tehran research reactor, or diluting it to the 5 percent level. Enrichment to 90 percent is required for weapons grade uranium.

- * Freeze its present enrichment capacity, by not installing any more gas centrifuges, thus leaving over half of the existing 16,000 centrifuges inoperable.

- * Halt work on the Arak heavy water reactor which, when completed, has the potential to produce plutonium for a nuclear weapon.

- * Accept the most intrusive International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection regime ever put into practice, including enhanced monitoring, detailed information of all existing and planned sites, daily visits to key nuclear facilities and inspections of

uranium mines, mills and centrifuge workshops.

Washington was at pains to stress that Iran received very little in return. In a statement yesterday, US President Obama declared that the US had agreed to "modest relief, while continuing to apply our toughest sanctions." The existing US-led sanctions have halved Iran's crucial oil exports and virtually frozen it out of the international banking and financial system, resulting in high inflation rates, rising unemployment and economic hardship for the population.

Under the interim agreement, Iran will have access to about \$3.5 billion of its own assets, frozen in international bank accounts, but only in stages. It will also be able to trade in petrochemicals, gold and precious metals and aircraft parts. In a tacit admission that the sanctions had hit imports of food and vital medical supplies, the agreement facilitates so-called humanitarian trade. The total value of the concessions is estimated at just \$7 billion.

Differences of interpretation have already emerged, pointing to the possibility of a breakdown of the deal's implementation. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani declared that the agreement acknowledged for the first time the country's "right" to uranium enrichment, a claim that US Secretary of State John Kerry vigorously denied.

Over the next six months, the US and its European allies will undoubtedly intensify the pressure on Iran for further major concessions, not only to wind back its nuclear programs substantially, but on other economic and strategic issues, including the war in Syria. Obama yesterday warned that if Iran did not fall into line, "we will turn off the relief and ratchet up the pressure." While not spelling out a specific military threat, Obama nevertheless declared that as commander-in-chief, "I will do what is necessary to prevent Iran from obtaining

a nuclear weapon.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday condemned the deal, declaring that it was not “a historic agreement” but “a historic mistake.” He denounced it for allowing the “most dangerous regime in the world” to take a significant step “towards obtaining the world’s most dangerous weapon.” Israel not only already has an arsenal of nuclear weapons, but also a long record of military aggression in the Middle East.

Netanyahu declared after a cabinet meeting that Israel would not be bound by the accord and had an “obligation to defend itself, by itself, against any threat.” The prime minister has repeatedly warned of military action against Iran. Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman said: “Apparently, we are going to have to make decisions, when all the options are on the table.”

Saudi Arabia maintained a stony official silence yesterday on the agreement. Last Friday, however, the Saudi ambassador to Britain, Prince Mohammed bin Nawaf bin Abdulaziz, warned that Riyadh would not “sit idly by ... and not think seriously how we can best defend our country and our region.”

The Obama administration confronts opposition in the US Congress. Democrat chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Bob Menendez declared that he would work with his colleagues to ensure harsher sanctions against Iran were ready “should the talks falter or Iran fail to implement or breach the interim agreement.” Democrat Senator Chuck Schumer, however, foreshadowed that “Democrats and Republicans will join together and pass additional sanctions when we return in December”—a move that is likely to scuttle any agreement.

Despite the opposition, both domestic and from key Middle Eastern allies, the Obama administration is pressing ahead for a comprehensive agreement with Tehran. Washington’s primary concern is not Iran’s nuclear programs, but to gain US access to Iran’s huge reserves of oil and gas, and enlist Tehran in US efforts to ensure its dominant role in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The bourgeois Iranian regime has previously indicated its willingness to cut a deal with Washington to end the confrontation since the 1979 Iranian revolution. In 2003, the current Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif was closely involved in drawing up an offer

for “a grand bargain” with the US that was ignored by the Bush administration. The US also effectively sabotaged talks between Iran and the so-called EU3—Britain, France and Germany—between 2003 and 2005 when Iran suspended uranium enrichment and allowed intrusive IAEA inspections.

The Obama administration, however, has been exploring the possibility of a rapprochement with Iran, particularly since Hassan Rouhani’s election as president in June. He is aligned with factions of the ruling elite seeking to ease tensions with the US, and was the chief nuclear negotiator in the earlier talks with the EU3.

An Associated Press article over the weekend detailed secret talks this year between top US officials, including Secretary of State Kerry and Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, and Iranian representatives. Beginning in March, at least five clandestine meetings, brokered by Oman’s Sultan Qaboos, covered not just Iran’s nuclear programs, but a range of issues, including the war in Syria.

The meetings were kept secret from other members of the P5+1 group and from Israel until the UN General Assembly meeting in September. The day after Obama informed Netanyahu of the clandestine discussions, the Israeli prime minister used his address to the UN general assembly to denounce Rouhani as a “wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

Behind the ferocity of Netanyahu’s criticism of both Rouhani and yesterday’s Geneva agreement is the fear that any, even limited, understanding between Washington and Tehran could alter strategic relations in the Middle East, undermining the position of Israel and other US allies, and benefiting their regional rival, Iran.



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