

Implementation of US-Iran interim nuclear deal stalls

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Negotiators for Iran and the P-6—the US, its European allies (Britain, France, and Germany), Russia and China—extended a two-day meeting on implementing last month’s interim agreement on Iran’s nuclear program into a third and fourth day. The “technical” negotiations concluded Sunday without agreement, however, due to what Iran termed “serious differences.”

It is now almost a month since the interim deal was reached, but Iran and the great powers have not been able to agree on how it will be implemented and when it will come into force.

Conferring by telephone Sunday afternoon, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and the P-6’s lead representative, European Union Foreign Policy Chief Catherine Ashton, agreed that the “technical” or “expert-level” negotiations will resume after Christmas.

Coming after several rounds of such “technical” talks, however, yesterday’s inconclusive outcome has clearly irritated and troubled Iran’s government. Iranian officials have publicly questioned whether the interim agreement will hold.

Speaking at a joint press conference Sunday with the Italian Foreign Minister Emma Bonino, Zarif said, “The talks on implementing the accord are not easy. ... I hope all sides will avoid delving into issues that could become troublesome and complicate the process.”

The parties to the negotiations are tight-lipped about them, but Abbas Araqchi, Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator and the country’s deputy foreign minister told an Iranian news agency Sunday, there are “serious differences of opinion over the implementation of the deal.”

Without specifically naming the United States, Araqchi said earlier last week that given previous

instances of double-dealing by some of the P-6 countries, it could not be excluded that the interim agreement will collapse.

In the interim agreement, Iran has made sweeping concessions to Washington and its allies, agreeing to freeze and in important cases roll back its nuclear program, as well as subjecting its nuclear facilities to the most intrusive-ever inspection regime.

In exchange, the US and its allies have offered Iran minimal easing of the economic sanctions that have halved its oil exports since 2011 and frozen it out of the world banking system. According to the US, the sanctions “relief” will provide Iran only an additional \$7 billion over the 6-month life of the agreement, equal to what the sanctions are costing Iran in foregone oil revenues in just 6 weeks. Some \$4.3 billion of the \$7 billion is Iran’s own money, payments for oil exports owed by China, India and other Asian countries frozen by the US-EU sanctions.

A major stumbling block in the finalization of the agreement is Washington’s determination to ensure that this minor relaxation of sanctions not inadvertently provide Tehran with any way to access more than the stipulated \$7 billion. Moreover, so as to maintain maximum leverage, the US reportedly wants the frozen funds to be released incrementally, thus making each release the potential occasion for further US demands.

Apparently, the US and its allies are also demanding fresh guarantees to ensure that Iran fulfills its pledge not to enrich uranium beyond five percent and the right for International Atomic Energy Agency officials to inspect ballistic and other military sites from which they have hitherto been barred.

In a provocation, the Obama administration placed an additional 18 Iranian companies under its sanctions regime on December 12, meaning they will be barred

from access to the world banking system.

This action led Iran's government to immediately suspend the technical talks and accuse the US of violating the "spirit" of the interim accord, which commits Washington to refrain from imposing fresh sanctions while the two sides seek to reach a final agreement. But the Iranian government walkout was clearly directed at least as much at containing growing opposition within Iran to the interim deal as sending a message to Washington.

With Iran's economy reeling under the sanctions' impact and fearing social unrest, Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime has signaled its eagerness to reach an accommodation with US imperialism—including offering to assist the US in stabilizing the broader Middle East under its hegemony, from Afghanistan to Lebanon, and to provide US and EU energy companies privileged access to Iran's vast oil and natural gas resources.

But significant sections of the Iranian elite are perturbed by the scope of the concessions ceded by the government of President Hassan Rouhani, especially as the crippling sanctions remain in place and the US continues to brandish the threat of war.

After a storm of protest, Zarif was forced to retract remarks he'd made earlier this month in which he sought to justify the interim nuclear deal by asserting that the US would only need "a couple of bombs" to destroy Iran's infrastructure.

Rebutting Zarif's remarks, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Mohammad Ali Jafari, said, "American bombs may cause damage to our infrastructure, but the missile and strategic capabilities of the IRGC are remarkable." Commenting on the nuclear agreement, he said Iran had "given the maximum and received the minimum." Heeding the call from Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei for all factions of the state and elite to support the government's attempt to reach an accommodation with Washington, Jafari hastened to add that the interim deal had not crossed Iran's "red lines."

The Obama administration, meanwhile, continues to reach out to key regional allies, most importantly Israel and Saudi Arabia, with assurances of unreserved US support and—in the case of Israel—direct participation in formulating US demands in a "final agreement" with Iran.

Underscoring the US's determination to bring Iran to heel, Obama himself publicly declared in a recent speech that he didn't consider the chances of a final US-Iran deal at "more than 50-50." Secretary of State John Kerry told Congress he had come away from the talks that led to the interim agreement "with serious questions about whether or not Iran is ready and willing to make some of the choices that have to be made."

And while Obama and Kerry are opposing a bill unveiled by 26 Senators last Thursday—half of them Democrats—calling for the imposition of still harsher sanctions on Iran that would cut off all its oil exports should the US find Tehran has violated the interim agreement or it expires without a final agreement; the president has said that if additional sanctions are needed Congress can impose them "in a day, on a dime."

Significantly, the US has moved to bar Iran from next month's UN-backed international conference on a political settlement to the Syrian conflict. As a precondition for its participation, Washington is insisting that Tehran accept that the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, its close ally, must abdicate, giving way to a "transitional government," in which half the seats would be held by the US-sponsored, Islamist-led opposition.

"Our partners in the United States are still not convinced that Iran's participation would be the right thing to do," said UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi Friday.



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