

Iran and US finalize interim nuclear deal

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Washington and Tehran announced yesterday that the interim nuclear agreement Iran reached with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany seven weeks ago will come into effect January 20.

Under the six-month interim agreement concluded November 24, Iran made sweeping concessions to the US and its European Union allies—France, Britain, and Germany—agreeing to freeze and roll back its civilian nuclear energy program and to submit to the International Atomic Energy Agency’s most intrusive-ever inspections regime. In exchange, the Western powers agreed to provide Tehran with what the Obama administration has called a “modest,” “reversible” relaxation of the economic sanctions that have crippled Iran’s economy.

Nonetheless, negotiations to implement the interim agreement proved protracted, as the US and its allies sought to extort additional concessions from Tehran.

Several rounds of “technical” negotiations were held in Geneva, the most recent last Thursday and Friday. According to Iran’s deputy foreign minister, Abbas Araqchi, he and the EU’s deputy chief of foreign policy, Helga Schmid, were still working to resolve differences yesterday morning.

Little has been said publicly about the issues in dispute over the interim deal’s implementation. But it is known that the US and EU powers were trying to limit Iran’s ability to work on developing better centrifuges for uranium enrichment, although the interim agreement had placed no limits on Iran’s right to conduct such research.

Another point of contention was how often International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors will be authorized to visit Iranian facilities. The BBC is reporting that as of January 20, inspectors will have daily access to the Fordo uranium enrichment site and will be authorized to conduct monthly inspections at the non-operational Arak heavy water reactor.

A third major stumbling block was US and EU insistence that numerous “safeguards” had to be built into the sanctions “relief” so as to make doubly and trebly

certain that Iran continues to be frozen out of the world banking system and that its oil exports remain halved from 2011 levels.

Under the interim agreement, Iran is to receive little more than \$7 billion in sanctions relief. This is equivalent to what the sanctions are costing Iran in foregone oil exports every six weeks. Moreover, \$4.2 billion of this \$7 billion is Iran’s own money—funds that China, India, and other Asian countries have been prevented from paying to Iran for oil shipments they have already received. (This, it need be added, is only a small fraction of the more than \$70 billion in Iranian funds currently frozen in foreign banks.)

The implementation agreement has not been publicly released. But it has been revealed that the \$4.2 billion is to be doled out in eight increments, with several of the payments explicitly tied to Iran meeting targets toward the complete elimination of its stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium by the agreement’s end. The last payment, emphasized US Secretary of State John Kerry, “will not be available to Iran until the (agreement’s) very last day (July 20).”

US President Barack Obama issued a statement Sunday welcoming the finalization of the interim agreement. “Iran,” he crowed, “will for the first time start eliminating its stockpile of higher levels of enriched uranium and dismantling some of the infrastructure that makes such enrichment possible.”

Obama went on to stress the extremely limited and conditional character of the sanctions relief, insisting that it could be rescinded at any time, should Washington deem that Tehran is not fulfilling the terms of the interim agreement.

“We will continue to vigorously enforce the broader sanctions regime,” declared the president, “and if Iran fails to meet its commitments we will move to increase our sanctions.”

At the same time, Obama felt compelled to speak out against a US congressional bid to pass legislation threatening Iran with still harsher sanctions. Warning that

such action would effectively scuttle the interim agreement, he vowed to veto any law imposing additional sanctions as long as the agreement is in force and Iran (as deemed by the US) abides by it.

According to press reports, 59 US senators, including the Democratic chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Bob Menendez, and 14 other Democratic senators, have endorsed a draft bill that would hit Iran with much tougher sanctions—including the phasing out of all Iranian oil exports by 2015—the day after the interim agreement expires. (There is an option under the interim agreement for it to be extended by mutual agreement for an additional six months.)

The Senate bill also stipulates that any final agreement must eliminate any Iranian capacity to enrich uranium—a demand Tehran has always insisted it will never accept.

The bid to impose additional sanctions on Iran is being encouraged by a significant faction of the US political and national security elite and by the Israeli government. While he has since somewhat moderated his rhetoric, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded to the November 24 accord with vociferous denunciations, declaring that Israel would not necessarily be bound by it, i.e., by threatening unilateral military action against Iran.

In response to the Senate bill, more than 200 of the 290 members of Iran's parliament have endorsed a bill that would increase Iran's uranium enrichment to 60 percent. Iran's foreign minister, a strong supporter of rapprochement with the US, has warned that the government would have no choice but to obey the bill were it to be passed into law.

The six-month interim agreement is supposed to “put time back on the clock,” delaying a direct US-Iranian confrontation so as to permit negotiations on a “final resolution” of the conflict over Iran's nuclear program.

According to the Iranian government, the “final agreement” talks will begin next month. Washington will undoubtedly use them as they used the talks on finalizing the interim agreement to ratchet up pressure on Iran.

In their comments yesterday, both President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry stressed that the coming negotiations would be far more difficult than those that produced the interim agreement. In a speech last month, Obama said the chances of an Iranian-US rapprochement were no more than “50-50.”

The US pulled back at the eleventh-hour in early September from attacking Syria, Iran's close ally, and made a diplomatic turn toward Tehran. Since then, Obama and Kerry have repeatedly stressed that it is in

Washington's interests to explore if Tehran can be bullied into submission before going further down the path of confrontation and war.

Behind this shift lies the Obama administration's concern that a further US war of aggression in the Middle East would seriously undercut its “pivot to Asia,” that is, its efforts to isolate and prepare to militarily confront China. Washington calculates that Iran's bourgeois rulers—who have repeatedly signaled their eagerness for a rapprochement with the US—can be harnessed to US strategic interests in the Middle East.

Fearful that the economic devastation caused by the sanctions will provoke an explosion of working class opposition, the leaders of the Islamic Republic have offered to assist the US in stabilizing the region under its hegemony, from Afghanistan to Lebanon, and to give the US and EU transnationals privileged access to Iran's energy resources.

For US imperialism, the nuclear dispute with Iran has always been a pretext—a means of isolating and bullying Iran and providing a political cover for its preparations to wage an aggressive war for regime-change.

The nuclear issue was first raised by the administration of George W. Bush in 2003, just after the US invasion of Iraq and with a view to preparing the groundwork for a second war promoted on the basis of phony charges of “weapons of mass destruction.”

The subsequent Iraqi insurgency gave Washington pause. But the US campaign of threats and bullying continued. The sanctions that the US and its EU allies have imposed on Iran since 2011—and which remain in force under the interim agreement that comes in force on January 20—are among the most severe ever imposed on a country outside of war.



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