US intensifies pressure on Iran as talks on permanent nuclear pact begin

Keith Jones
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Negotiators for Iran and the P-6 (the five permanent UN Security Council members and Germany) are convening today in Vienna to begin talks on a "permanent resolution" to the dispute over Iran's nuclear program.

In the four weeks since a six-month interim nuclear agreement between Iran and the P-6 came into force, Washington has ratcheted up its pressure on Iran. This has included threatening Iran with military attack, stepping up support for the Islamist proxies of the US in the regime-change war against Syria's Baathist regime (Iran's closest governmental ally), and serving notice that it considers the concessions Tehran has made to date no more than a small down payment.

The US has also moved aggressively to uphold the punishing economic sanctions it has imposed on Iran. These sanctions—themselves tantamount to war—have halved Iran's oil exports, crippled its trade by freezing the country out of the world banking system, and caused the deaths of thousands by denying Iran access to medicines and advanced medical equipment.

As part of the US campaign to ensure—to use the provocative words of Obama administration officials—that "Iran is not open for business," US Secretary of State John Kerry publicly rebuked France's most important employer association for organizing a hundred-strong delegation of corporate executives to visit Tehran in search of future sales and investment deals.

And at a joint White House press conference last week with French President Francois Hollande, Obama made a public show of admonishing those exploring business possibilities in Iran. "I can tell you," declared the US president, "that they do so at their own peril right now. Because we will come down on them like a ton of bricks."

A chastened Hollande reiterated the support of Washington's European Union allies for the US-led sanctions regime. "I certainly let" the corporate executives who traveled to Iran "know the sanctions were in force and would remain in force," said Hollande. "No commercial agreement could be signed."

The US threats have had a chilling effect. Iran's deputy oil minister, Abbas Sha'ri, told the *Financial Times* last week that although the interim agreement has lifted sanctions on Iran's petrochemical industry, this has had no practical impact because foreign banks and insurance companies are uncertain what transactions are allowed and are terrified of US retribution. "US politicians," explained Sha'ri, "keep saying sanctions are still in effect, which makes those who wish to work with us hesitate."

Wendy Sherman, the lead negotiator of the US in the P-6 talks, has boasted that the sanctions "relief" the US granted in the interim agreement in return for Iran rolling back important parts of its nuclear program and freezing others is designed to deny Iran "any significant economic benefits."

"Iran's oil exports will still be constrained at levels that are down over 60 percent since 2011," Sherman told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee at a February 4 hearing. She emphasized that Iran will continue to lose $4.5 billion per month in foregone oil exports and is allowed to repatriate just $4.2 billion over the life of the agreement. This, she noted, represents only "a modest fraction of Iran's $100 billion in foreign exchange reserves, the vast majority of which are restricted or inaccessible." The interim agreement's six-month time frame, added Sherman, "will make it difficult for any long-term business to take place even in the (handful of) sectors for which we have provided relief."

In her Senate testimony, Sherman also made clear that the US intends to force Iran to dismantle most of its civilian nuclear program and place the remainder under a highly intrusive inspections regime. Moreover, should Iran cede to these demands, the Obama administration has a long list of others—from eliminating Iran's ballistic missile capacity to ending support to the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah, Palestinian groups and opponents of Bahrain's monarchical dictatorship.

Specific US demands at the Vienna talks are expected to include closure of the Fordo underground nuclear facility, scrapping of the uncompleted Arak heavy-water plutonium

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reactor, destruction of four-fifths of Iran's centrifuges or uranium enrichment capacity, including all of its more advanced centrifuges, and access to Iranian military facilities. The US is also adamant that any "permanent" agreement places Iran under special international scrutiny and deny it the rights accorded other signatories of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty for twenty to twenty-five years.

These demands and the Obama administration's bullying and threats underscore that its diplomatic turn is no more than a tactical shift in the means by which US imperialism is seeking to strengthen its hegemony over the Middle East, the world's most important oil-exporting region.

Moreover, as Washington's escalation of its regime-change war against Iran's Syrian ally indicates, Washington could soon execute another abrupt turn, launching direct military action against Syria, Iran or both and plunging the entire region and potentially the world into war.

Obama is himself on record as saying that there is no more than a "50-50" chance of the US reaching a final nuclear agreement with Iran. Kerry, for his part, declared the very week the interim agreement came into force that were the US to conclude that Iran had violated the deal, or were it to expire without a final agreement in place, "the military option of the United States is ready and prepared to do what it would have to do."

The US threats and bullying have caused dismay and anger in Iran.

Speaking before a large crowd in Tabriz yesterday, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, said he was "not optimistic about the negotiations" that begin today in Vienna. They "will not lead anywhere," he declared.

Khamenei said the US has used the nuclear issue as "an excuse" to bully and subvert Iran. "Even if one day, against all the odds, it is solved based on the Americans' expectations, then Americans will seek another issue to follow it. Just pay attention to the spokespersons of the US government, who have also raised the issue of human rights, missiles and arms," said Khamenei.

The Islamic Republic's supreme leader coupled these warnings with a reaffirmation of his support for the attempt of President Hassan Rouhani and his government to reach an accommodation with Washington. "What our foreign ministry and officials have started will continue," said Khamenei, adding that "Iran will not violate what it has promised"—i.e., the interim nuclear agreement.

Khamenei, who plays a Bonapartist role within Iran's political elite and state apparatus, has repeatedly voiced skepticism about a rapprochement with US imperialism, while urging support for Rouhani's overtures to Washington and pulling strings behind the scenes in support of his government.

Behind this maneuvering lie explosive social and political contradictions. There are differences within the elite over the extent of the concessions already made to Washington in exchange for token sanctions relief. Above all, there is the fear that the mass unemployment and hyper-inflation caused by the sanctions will provoke a challenge from the working class.

In an attempt to mollify popular apprehension about Iran surrendering to US imperialism, the regime has publicly declared that no issues outside the nuclear dispute will figure in the P-6 talks.

While this may be formally true, all manner of back-channel negotiations are clearly underway. A web site close to Iran's intelligence apparatus recently reported that Secretary of State Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif "are in constant contact in behind-the-scenes negotiations."

Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime knows full well that any resolution of the nuclear issue and eventual staggered removal of the sanctions require a deal with the US, and that such a deal will require that Tehran submit to Washington's strategic agenda for the Middle East—at the expense of the Iranian working class and the oppressed of the entire region.

To signal Tehran's readiness to align with US interests, Iranian officials have repeatedly pointed to the military-intelligence assistance Iran gave the US during the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and its support for the installation of Hamid Karzai as the country's puppet president at the December 2001 Bonn Conference.

Iran's rulers have also invited the US and European oil giants back into the country, announcing that they are eager to grant them privileged access to Iran's oil and natural gas riches. In a further indication of the Iranian bourgeoisie's readiness to forge a new partnership with US and European imperialism against the working class, the Rouhani government recently invited an International Monetary Fund delegation to visit the country and make economic policy recommendations.

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