

US dictates terms in international talks with Iran

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Following the conclusion of international talks on Iran's nuclear program yesterday, the US once again made it plain that there would be no final deal unless Tehran acceded to all Washington's demands. The three days of negotiations in Vienna produced nothing more than a broad framework for further talks over coming months. No issues of substance were discussed, let alone resolved.

The meeting was the first since an interim agreement was reached last November that gave Tehran limited relief from crippling economic sanctions in return for rolling back or freezing significant aspects of its nuclear program. The agreement between the so-called P5+1 (the US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany) and Iran only came into effect on January 20, after weeks of haggling about the details, and is due to expire on July 20.

At a joint press conference, European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif gave an upbeat assessment, declaring that "a good start" was made. However, US officials quickly made clear that sharp disagreements existed, even on the issues to be formally discussed.

Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal*, a senior American official in Vienna contradicted statements by Zarif that the negotiations would be limited to Iran's nuclear activities and not extend to other areas. Referring to Iran's ballistic missile program, he said: "Every issue of concern to us has been discussed, will be discussed, is on the table."

The remark underscores Washington's real agenda. For more than a decade, the US has used unsubstantiated allegations about Iran's nuclear program as a pretext for economic sanctions and military threats aimed at securing Tehran's subordination to American interests in the region. The

US is exploiting the talks as the means, not only to dismantle Iran's nuclear programs, but to press Tehran on a long list of other demands—from eliminating its ballistic missile program to ending support for Palestinian groups and the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah.

At the same time, the Obama administration is intensifying its campaign against the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad, Iran's chief ally in the Middle East. While Iran is preoccupied with securing an end to the devastating sanctions through the Vienna talks, Washington is using the opportunity to ramp up support for Islamist militias and mercenary forces fighting to oust Assad. The US has not ruled out military intervention in Syria or against Iran—moves that would plunge the entire region into war.

The interim agreement provided Iran with access to a small portion of its own funds frozen in foreign accounts and lifted bans on a few economic sectors. But the most severe sanctions, which have halved Iran's oil exports and isolated it from the international banking and financial system, remain in place. In response to a large French business delegation to Tehran, Obama, standing alongside French President Francois Hollande last week, warned that the US would come down on any company breaching sanctions "like a ton of bricks."

Speaking to the media on Monday, a senior US official spelled out Washington's hostility to European corporate delegations to Tehran. "We would," he said, "prefer countries to wait and see where we get with a comprehensive agreement before rushing off to Iran." It is "not fair, in our view," the official continued, "for countries to go to Iran and say 'we want to get in line, so if a comprehensive agreement is reached we can be the first in line'."

In other words, the US wants to ensure that if a deal is struck, American corporate interests get the lion's share of access to lucrative business opportunities in Iran. Having broken diplomatic and economic relations with Tehran after the 1979 Iranian revolution, the US is at a disadvantage by comparison with its European rivals. Washington is intent on using its control over sanctions to ensure it is "first in line" in the event of any agreement.

The Iranian regime is desperate to end the sanctions, which, along with the loss of crucial oil revenues, have led to widespread factory closures, rising unemployment and poverty, and the threat of social unrest. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, with the backing of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, initiated talks with the P5+1 last year and has continued to signal Tehran's willingness to come to terms with Washington.

An International Atomic Energy Agency report yesterday confirmed that Iran had kept all its commitments under the interim agreement. Uranium enrichment to the 20 percent level has halted and Iran's stockpile either blended down to a lower level or rendered unusable for further enrichment to weapons-grade. No additional gas centrifuges have been installed at its enrichment plants. Construction work on its heavy-water reactor at Arak has stopped.

Rouhani is aligned with factions of the Iranian ruling elite that have long pushed for compromise with the US, sweeping pro-market reforms and the opening up of the Iranian economy to Western investment. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) issued an appraisal of the Iranian economy this week after being invited into the country for the first time in three years.

After pointing to the impact of sanctions—negative growth in 2012 and 2013 and inflation that soared to an annualised rate of 45 percent last July, IMF official Martin Cerisola noted that the government is "well aware of these challenges and the need to advance [pro-market] reforms" and has begun "preparatory work" in many areas.

As well as seeking to declare Iran open for business to foreign investors, the government is indicating its willingness to accommodate to the strategic interests of US imperialism in the Middle East. Foreign Minister Zarif told a German television interviewer earlier this month that Iran would be willing to recognise Israel if a

peace deal were reached between Israel and the Palestinians. While such a deal is improbable, Zarif's comments were a message to Washington that Iran is willing to abandon its position that Israel is an illegitimate state.

None of this is any guarantee that the US will reach a rapprochement with Iran. That will be determined by Washington's broader ambitions for regional and global hegemony. The Obama administration will take any Iranian concessions and proceed to make further demands, which will only end when the country is reduced to a subservient semi-colony.



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