

International talks on Iran's nuclear program stall

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Three days of negotiations in Vienna between Iran and the P5+1 grouping (the US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany) ended last Friday with no sign of any advance. The talks are aimed at a comprehensive agreement over Iran's nuclear program, which the Obama administration is insisting be largely dismantled, before it will lift US sanctions that have crippled the Iranian economy.

The latest Vienna round follows the conclusion of an interim agreement last November under which Iran froze or rolled back key aspects of its nuclear program in return for limited sanctions relief. The prospect for reaching a full agreement by the deadline of July 20 now appears increasingly remote.

Washington and its allies have routinely made unsubstantiated allegations that Iran is seeking to manufacture nuclear weapons—a claim that Tehran has repeatedly denied. The US has already made clear that its long list of demands must be met, including severe restrictions on Iran's uranium enrichment capacity.

The US wants Tehran to fall into line with American strategic interests in the Middle East, although that is not formally part of the negotiations. In particular, as the Obama administration intensifies its efforts for regime change in Syria, Washington is pushing Iran to end assistance to Tehran's ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

An unnamed senior US official described the Vienna negotiations as “a very slow and difficult process.” Bluntly putting the onus on Tehran, the official declared: “Iran still has some hard decisions to make. We're concerned that progress is not being made and that time is short.” A senior European diplomat reinforced the point, saying: “We had expected a little more flexibility on their side.”

Iranian officials told the IRNA news agency that “the

West has to abandon its excessive demands,” adding that “we had expected the Western side to become more realistic, but this doesn't appear to be the case yet.” Iran's deputy foreign minister Abbas Araqchi told the media that “no progress has been made.” The drafting of an accord—the main task of this round of talks—did not even begin because of “significant gaps” between the two sides.

An article in the *Economist* before the talks indicated that Iran had already made significant concessions to the US and its allies.

* Tehran has offered to redesign its heavy-water reactor being constructed at Arak so that it is fuelled by low-enriched uranium rather than natural uranium. The change would dramatically reduce the output of plutonium by 80 percent, but the US is insisting that the redesign be irreversible. Plutonium can be used to construct a nuclear bomb.

* Iran has suggested that its uranium enrichment plant at Fordow, which is buried deep beneath a mountain, would be transformed into a small research site, with its gas centrifuges moved to the country's main enrichment plant at Natanz. Israel, in particular, has demanded the Fordow facility be permanently shut, primarily because it is largely invulnerable to Israeli air strikes. Like the US, Israel has repeatedly threatened to attack Iran on the pretext of preventing it from acquiring nuclear weapons.

* Iranian negotiators have indicated their agreement to an intrusive inspection regime, including the Additional Protocol of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This would permit unscheduled inspections of Iranian facilities, at short notice, by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors.

Nevertheless, major obstacles to a deal remain.

Details of last week's talks have been kept under wraps, but the broad outlines have been leaked to the media. The US is insisting that Iran limit the number and type of centrifuges and thus its capacity to enrich uranium. There are currently 19,000 centrifuges installed at Fordow and Natanz, of which about 10,000 are operational. While Tehran wants to boost the number and introduce a more efficient type, Washington is pressing for a reduction to just 3,000–4,000 older IR-1 centrifuges.

Iran is seeking the capacity to produce low-enriched uranium (3.5 percent) to fuel its nuclear power reactor at Bushehr and future ones. It also wants to be able to manufacture uranium enriched to 20 percent to provide fuel rods for its Tehran research reactor, which is used to produce medical isotopes. Highly enriched uranium (90 percent) is needed to manufacture a nuclear weapon.

As part of the interim agreement, Tehran has halted the production of 20 percent enriched uranium and converted its stockpile to forms that cannot readily be used for making a weapon.

Even if Iran acceded to all Washington's demands, the list would continue to grow. Reuters reported an exchange at the talks last Wednesday during which the US delegation declared that it wanted to discuss Iran's ballistic missile program, as well as possible military dimensions of its previous nuclear research. Iran's foreign minister and chief negotiator Mohammad Javad Zarif brushed off the suggestions, but an American official later made clear that "every issue" had to be resolved.

The issue of "possible military dimensions" has a lengthy history. US allegations about Iranian nuclear weapons research all stem from documents that were allegedly found on a laptop that supposedly belonged to an Iranian nuclear researcher. The documents were supplied to the IAEA by Israeli and US intelligence agencies and have never been verified. Iran has branded them as forgeries.

The Obama administration has yet to provide a timetable for ending the harsh international sanctions regime that has slashed Iran's oil exports, leading to a slump in the value of Iran's currency, soaring inflation, factory closures and high levels of unemployment. If an agreement is not reached by July 20, the talks can be extended for another six months, putting even more

pressure on Tehran to bow to Washington's dictates.

At the same time, the Obama administration continues to keep "all options on the table," including launching a war against Iran. US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel reiterated the threat last Friday, telling Israeli leaders that the US would "do what we must" if negotiations failed.



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