

Iranian nuclear talks at impasse as deadline approaches

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24 November 2014

With the deadline on reaching an agreement due to expire today, international talks in Vienna over Iran's nuclear programs are reportedly deadlocked. US, European and Iranian officials are hinting at a further extension of negotiations, without which tensions will rapidly rise as Washington and its allies return to threats of tougher sanctions and war.

In an interim agreement reached last November, Iran agreed to wind back much of its civilian nuclear program in return for a limited, reversible lifting of US-led sanctions that have crippled the country's economy. The initial deadline expired in July after no "final" agreement was reached, but was extended in line with the interim deal, which allowed for an extension.

Washington, which has repeatedly accused Iran of seeking to build nuclear weapons, has sought to impose tough restrictions of Iran's uranium enrichment capacity and a highly intrusive inspection system. American officials told the *New York Times* they are seeking to extend the "breakout time" needed to produce enough highly-enriched uranium to construct a bomb to at least a year.

The Iranian regime has insisted all along that it is not aiming to build a nuclear weapon and is developing uranium enrichment plants to fuel nuclear power reactors. All its nuclear facilities are already closely monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ensure the low-enriched uranium is not diverted to other purposes. As far as Tehran is concerned, the critical element of any agreement is a rapid lifting of sanctions that have cut Iran off from the international financial system and severely limited its oil exports.

Formally, the negotiations are between Iran and the so-called P5+1—the US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany. However, the US and European Union

have played the central role in talks with Iran, pursuing demands drawn up by Washington.

In an American ABC interview yesterday, US President Barack Obama declared that the gaps between the two sides were "significant." He made clear that the onus is on Tehran to accept Washington's terms, stating that the US wanted "to shut off a whole bunch of different avenues whereby Iran might get a nuclear weapon" in return for sanctions being "rolled back step by step as Iran is doing what it's supposed to do."

The US is not only demanding that Iran restrict the number and type of gas centrifuges used for uranium enrichment, as well as any stockpiles, but accept a new inspection regime covering all aspects of its nuclear programs. All the while, sanctions would remain in force, only gradually being removed as Tehran accedes to US benchmarks.

Washington's demands are exacerbating tensions within Iranian ruling circles. President Hassan Rouhani won last year's presidential election by calling for "dialogue" with the world to end Iran's diplomatic and economic isolation, which has impacted heavily on working people, fuelling discontent. Rouhani represents sections of the political and business elite seeking to implement pro-market restructuring and open up Iran to foreign investment.

As the talks have dragged on, Rouhani's hard-line opponents have become more openly critical of the negotiations. A recent editorial in the conservative *Kayhan* newspaper declared that "without lifting all sanctions, the deal is invalid and nullified." This faction is closely connected to sections of the clerical and security establishment that have benefitted from their control of significant sectors of the economy.

The ultimate authority on Iran's foreign and defence

policy is not the president, but Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He gave the green light for Rouhani to begin negotiations last year, but recently spoke of the need for a “resistance economy” if the terms of any agreement were too harsh and sanctions continued.

The US is exploiting the nuclear issue to extract concessions from Iran on a range of issues in the Middle East. Earlier this month, the *Wall Street Journal* leaked details of a secret letter from Obama to Khamenei, reportedly linking a nuclear agreement to Iranian cooperation in the US-led war against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militias. The main US war aim is the toppling of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a long-standing ally of Iran (see: “Obama’s letter to Iranian leader complicates nuclear talks”).

Throughout the latest negotiations, US Secretary of State John Kerry has kept in close contact with two key US allies in the Middle East—Saudi Arabia and Israel—both of which regard Iran as a threat to their regional interests. Yesterday, he met with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal at Vienna airport for a second briefing in a week. Saudi Arabia has hinted that it will launch its own nuclear program if it regards the outcome of negotiations with Iran as unsatisfactory.

On Saturday, Kerry also called Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been highly critical of the negotiations from the outset. Netanyahu told a weekly cabinet meeting yesterday that he was pressing a “vigorous” case that Iran not be allowed to become a “nuclear threshold state.” He added: “No agreement at all would be preferable to a bad agreement that would endanger Israel, the Middle East and all of humanity.”

Netanyahu’s comments are utterly hypocritical. Israel has not only built its own substantial nuclear arsenal, but has repeatedly engaged in military provocations and wars that have threatened to engulf the entire Middle East. Like the US, the Israeli government has repeatedly declared that all options—that is, including the military one—are on the table in dealing with Iran’s nuclear facilities.

Citing unnamed Israeli officials, an article in the *Jerusalem Post* on Saturday stated that Israel had sent a stark warning to its allies that the current proposals under discussion would only perpetuate the crisis, “backing Israel into a corner from which military force

against Iran provides the only logical exit.”

Last year’s interim agreement did not provide for any extension beyond one year. In recent weeks, the US has kept the pressure on Iran to make major concessions by saying that a further extension was not on the table. Washington will no doubt exact a price to keep talks alive, if today’s deadline passes without a comprehensive deal being reached.



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