

US-Iran negotiations inch toward a nuclear agreement

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Talks this week in Geneva between US Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif appear to have taken a step toward a long-term agreement over Iran's nuclear programs. The prospect of a deal to end the protracted US confrontation with the Iranian regime has already fuelled considerable tension between Washington and its allies in the Middle East, particularly the Israeli government.

Details of the closed-door negotiations leaked to the American media point to a pact that would limit or reduce Iran's existing uranium enrichment capability for a lengthy period, then allow it to increase the number of gas centrifuges that are used to enrich uranium. The US and its allies have accused Tehran of seeking to build a nuclear weapon, a charge that Iranian leaders have repeatedly denied.

The presence of US Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz and Ali Akbar Salehi, director of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran, in Geneva points to high-level discussions of various technical aspects of an agreement. Many questions remain unanswered, including the time frames involved and the ending of crippling US-led sanctions—the critical issue for Iranian leaders.

Press reports this week suggesting that the freeze on Iran's uranium enrichment could be 10 years provoked sharp criticism from US Congressional Republican leaders and Israeli ministers.

Republican Senator Bob Corker, the foreign relations committee chairman, declared that 10 years was not long enough and was “very concerning.” Another Republican, Lindsey Graham, denounced the Obama administration for negotiating with Iranian officials who are “hell bent on expanding their influence in the Mideast in a destructive fashion.”

Israel's Intelligence Minister Yuval Steinitz said on

Monday that Israel considered the negotiations “totally unsatisfactory,” as a deal would allow Iran to be “extremely close” to a “dangerous breakout program.” He condemned a 10-year time frame as “sacrificing the future of Israel and the US, and the future of the world.”

The Israeli government has bitterly opposed the negotiations from the outset and repeatedly threatened military action against Iran if all Tehran's nuclear facilities were not dismantled. Israel, which has an arsenal of nuclear weapons, is determined to ensure its unchallenged military superiority in the Middle East.

Relations between the Obama administration and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who will address the US Congress next week at the invitation of Republican leaders, have become rancorous. Obama has declined to meet Netanyahu, who will undoubtedly use his speech to denounce the talks with Iran.

On Tuesday, Obama's national security adviser Susan Rice declared that Netanyahu's decision to travel to Washington before next month's election in Israel was “destructive of the fabric of the relationship” between the two countries.

Addressing US Senate hearings on Tuesday, Secretary of State Kerry defended the talks with Iran and dismissed suggestions that a time-frame was decided. “The answer is the proverbial ‘don't believe what you read.’ I've told you it's not true,” he said. Kerry said he expects to know soon if Tehran would agree to “an acceptable and verifiable plan” to curtail its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief.

The US has always placed the onus on Iran to demonstrate that it has no plans to build a nuclear weapon. In practice, this means severe restrictions on its uranium enrichment to ensure no possibility of “break-out”—that is, to produce enough weapons-grade

uranium—within a year. The US has also demanded a highly intrusive inspection regime, on top of the International Atomic Energy Agency monitoring of all Iranian nuclear facilities.

The negotiations involving the so-called P5+1 group—the US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany—began with an interim agreement in November 2013 that followed the election of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in June. Iran was compelled to freeze or limit much of its nuclear activity in return for limited sanctions relief. After the initial deadlines ran out, the talks were extended last November to the end of next month to secure the framework of an agreement, and June to finalise it.

The Obama administration has deliberately dragged out the talks to force Iran to agree to its terms. Punitive US-led economic sanctions have halved Iran's oil exports, sent inflation spiralling and slashed government revenue. The current slump in global oil prices has further hit the Iranian economy, with growth expected to more than halve to 2 or even 1 percent in the coming fiscal year.

Iranian President Rouhani insisted on Wednesday that a comprehensive nuclear agreement would have to include the lifting of international sanctions. “The side negotiating with us should know that conclusion of the talks and the result of a deal should be removal of the whole oppressive and illegal sanctions,” he said.

Rouhani had the backing of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to proceed with the negotiations. Khamenei, who has the ultimate say over foreign and defence policies, has to date kept conservative critics of the talks inside Iran in check. He warned yesterday that if the US and its allies retained the sanctions, Iran could retaliate by holding “back gas that Europe and the world is so dependent on.”

While pressing for an agreement to end the sanctions, the Iranian regime is keeping its options open should the talks fail. Last week, Defence Minister Hossein Dehghan signed an agreement in Moscow to expand military ties between the two countries. Noting their shared viewpoints, Dehghan said: “Iran and Russia are able to confront the expansionist intervention and greed of the United States through cooperation, synergy and activating strategic potential capacities.”

Any nuclear agreement faces numerous obstacles. The National Council of Resistance of Iran, a pro-

Western Iranian exile group, claimed on Tuesday to have evidence that Iran was conducting secret nuclear research and some uranium enrichment at a site dubbed Lavizan-3. These claims are clearly aimed at undermining the negotiations. This organisation has in the past been used by Israeli intelligence as a conduit for publishing allegations against the Iranian regime.

While Israel has publicly opposed the talks, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states are no less hostile to a deal with Iran. Saudi Arabia, which regards Iran as a dangerous regional rival, has threatened to develop its own nuclear programs if Tehran is permitted to maintain its nuclear facilities. An unnamed Arab official told the *Wall Street Journal* last week: “At this stage, we prefer a collapse of the diplomatic process to a bad deal.”

With further US-Iranian negotiations due next week, tensions will undoubtedly continue to rise. Provocations or military action aimed at sabotaging the negotiations cannot be ruled out. In the five years up to 2012, Israeli intelligence engaged in a criminal campaign of assassinations and sabotage inside Iran aimed at undermining its nuclear programs. Israel's Channel 2 aired a program on Tuesday suggesting that Saudi Arabia was on the point of granting Israel permission to overfly its territory “en route to attack Iran if an attack is necessary.”



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