

US intensifies pressure on Iran at nuclear talks

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16 March 2015

With time running out to reach an agreement on Iran's nuclear programs, the US is intensifying the pressure on Tehran to make substantial concessions in talks this week in Lausanne, Switzerland. In comments yesterday, US Secretary of State John Kerry made clear that the US was prepared to walk away from the negotiating table if Iran does not meet its demands.

Kerry told the media that "important gaps" remain to be resolved prior to the March 31 deadline for key elements of an agreement to be finalised. The aim, he said, "is not just to get any deal, it's to get the right deal. Time is of the essence, the clock is ticking and important decisions need to be made [by Iran]."

Kerry is due to meet today with Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif who plans to travel to Brussels later in the day to meet with his counterparts from Britain, France, Germany and the European Union (EU). The talks in Lausanne will continue tomorrow.

Details of the negotiations leaked to the *New York Times* indicate that the US is insisting on strict limitations on Iran's nuclear facilities that would last at least a decade before being eased. Washington's aim is to guarantee a "break-out" time of at least a year—that is, restrictions to ensure Iran would take 12 months to produce enough fuel for one nuclear weapon.

Tehran has repeatedly declared that it has no plans to build a nuclear arsenal. Moreover, as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), all of its uranium enrichment plants, nuclear facilities and stockpiles are already closely monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

According to the *New York Times*, the US is insisting on a highly intrusive inspection regime beyond the end of the formal agreement, including immediate access to any sites, including military bases, on suspicion of nuclear-related activity. As the NYT noted, this

"verification" procedure goes well "beyond the toughest measures [IAEA] inspectors use in any other country."

The demand highlights Washington's utter hypocrisy. While demanding that Iran agree to measures far in excess of the requirements of an NPT signatory, the US turns a blind eye to Israel, which has not signed the treaty, and has already manufactured a substantial nuclear arsenal. In the case of India, the US ratified a deal that effectively nullifies the NPT and allows India to keep its stockpile of banned nuclear weapons.

Kerry has also rejected Iran's demands for the immediate lifting of international sanctions that have crippled the Iranian economy by more than halving its oil exports since 2011 and cutting off access to international banking and finance. Official unemployment is at least 13 percent while other estimates put the figure at 20 percent. Annual inflation hit between 50 to 70 percent in mid-2013 before an initial agreement to start talks provided limited sanctions relief. The US is proposing a phased ending of sanctions.

In Washington, deep fissures have opened up over the nuclear agreement. In an unprecedented move last week, 47 Republican senators sent a letter to Tehran warning that any nuclear agreement could be abrogated by the next president or changed by congressional action. The letter, which followed a unilateral invitation to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to deliver an anti-Iranian tirade to a joint congressional sitting, was an obvious attempt to sabotage the talks and undermine the Obama administration.

Kerry hit back over the weekend. Speaking on CBS, he accused the Republicans of peddling "false information, directly calculated to interfere" in talks

and dismissed any suggestion that a deal had already been done. Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell shot back yesterday, saying: “The president is about to make what we believe is a very bad deal.”

The US has also begun talks with other permanent members of the UN Security Council—Britain, France, Russia and China—about a resolution that would lift UN sanctions on Iran. Such a step would make it harder for the US congress to obstruct a deal with Iran as many, but not all, of the US and European sanctions are underpinned by existing UN resolutions.

The rancour in the debate points to sharp differences in the American political establishment over a deal with Iran, which has been likened by some analysts to the US rapprochement with China in 1972. While there are obvious differences with the opening up of US-China relations, the talks in Lausanne are not simply about Iran’s nuclear programs. The Obama administration is seeking to enlist Tehran’s assistance in securing Washington’s interests in the Middle East as it intensifies its confrontations with Russia and China.

Kerry indicated yesterday that Washington might consider opening negotiations with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad over the establishment of a transitional regime in Syria—something that Washington has flatly ruled out previously and the US State Department later denied. Kerry, however, did indicate a renewed US diplomatic push to restart talks over Syria. While Kerry did not name Iran, Assad’s only ally in the Middle East, the US is obviously hoping for Tehran’s assistance in forcing the Syrian president to the negotiating table.

Longstanding US allies in the Middle East including Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are deeply hostile to any moves by the US to end its protracted stand-off with Iran. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia regard Iran as a dangerous rival for regional dominance. Washington’s relations with Tehran broke down after the 1979 Iranian revolution ousted Shah Reza Pahlavi, who had been central to US strategy in the Middle East. Relations further deteriorated after the Bush administration invaded Iraq in 2003 and signalled regime-change in Iran was its next objective.

Republican criticisms notwithstanding, the Obama administration has repeatedly made clear that any agreement with Iran will be on US terms. Ever since assuming office in 2009, Obama has insisted that “all

options remain on the table”—that is, including military strikes against Iran. If the US does “walk away” from the current talks, as Kerry indicated was possible, the military option would again loom large, amid a clamour for action from the Republican-dominated congress.

In a comment entitled “War is the only way to stop Iran” published in yesterday’s *Washington Post*, neo-con Joshua Muravchik suggested that the Obama administration had no alternative than to attack Iran even if it resulted in Iranian retaliation. “Yes, there are risks to military action. But Iran’s nuclear program and vaunting ambitions have made the world a more dangerous place. Its achievement of a bomb would magnify that danger manyfold. Alas, sanctions and deals will not prevent this,” he concluded.

Thus one of the advocates of the illegal US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq based on lies about weapons of mass destruction proposes a new war of aggression based on unsubstantiated claims about Iranian nuclear bombs. The Obama administration has no fundamental objection to waging war against Iran, but prefers to neutralise or even enlist Tehran, as it prepares for even more reckless and dangerous conflicts against nuclear-armed Russia and China.



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