

Iran nuclear talks in countdown to US-imposed deadline

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Talks over Iran's nuclear program between Iran and the P-6—the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany—continued late into the night Sunday. The US is insisting that a “framework” agreement be reached by the end of Tuesday, March 31.

While the Obama administration has yet to spell out what it will do if its March 31 deadline is not met, the Republican Party leadership and a significant section of congressional Democrats have vowed to quickly impose even more punishing economic sanctions against Iran, with the aim of cutting off all Iranian oil exports.

Under existing US and European Union sanctions, Iran's oil exports have been halved since 2011 and the country has been largely frozen out of the world financial system.

Over the weekend, US Secretary of State John Kerry was joined at the talks, which are being held in Lausanne, Switzerland, by the foreign ministers of Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China.

In their public statements, officials from the US and its EU allies, as well those from Iran, have indicated that some progress has been made toward reaching an agreement since negotiations resumed last Thursday. However, each side insists that the other must still make major concessions if a deal is to be reached.

“Everything could still fall apart,” an unnamed Western official told Reuters Sunday. On arriving in Lausanne Saturday, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier made an analogy between the talk's precarious state and the scaling of a Swiss mountain peak, saying the “final meters” are “the most difficult” and “decisive.”

One development indicating that Iran and the P-6 are moving closer to an agreement was the hysterical reaction from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who fears that an Iranian-US rapprochement would undercut Israel's role as Washington's principal Mideast ally. Over the weekend, Netanyahu said that the nuclear agreement that “appears to be emerging” confirmed “all our fears, and even more than that.” He charged Iran with “carrying out a pincer movement from the south to take over and occupy the entire

Middle East.” He added that the “Iran-Lausanne-Yemen axis is very dangerous to humanity and it must be stopped.”

According to some press reports, Iran has made significant concessions in recent days. These are said to include: accepting that Iran's nuclear program will have to function under rules more restrictive than those faced by any other signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty for at least 15 years; agreeing to reduce the number of centrifuges enriching uranium for use in its civilian nuclear facilities to under 6,000 (less than a third of its current capacity); and shipping most of its existing stockpile of enriched uranium to Russia.

The most contentious issues are reportedly the extent to which Iran will be able to continue nuclear research and development, including perfecting a new type of centrifuge that can enrich uranium at a much faster rate, and when and how the sanctions will be lifted.

Iran has repeatedly indicated that the sanctions—among the most crippling ever imposed on a country outside of wartime—are a make-or-break issue.

In an address marking the Iranian New Year (March 21), Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, insisted on “the removal of sanctions without any delay when an agreement is made.” He specifically denounced Washington for seeking to make the sanctions' removal, many years hence, conditional on Tehran passing a series of US-designed tests. Said Khamenei, “What the Americans repeat, ‘We'll sign the contract with Iran, then we'll see if they act upon the contract, then we'll remove the sanctions’—this is wrong and unacceptable.”

Washington is determined to keep much of the sanctions in place for years to come. And, just as importantly, it wants the sanctions—including those imposed under UN Security Council resolutions—to be only suspended, not rescinded. Suspension would make it far easier for the sanctions to be ratcheted back up should the Western powers ever deem that Iran has reneged on the nuclear deal.

How the US and its allies view the relaxation of sanctions is illustrated by the interim deal to which Iran and the P-6

agreed at the beginning of 2014, and which has subsequently been twice extended. Although Iran has frozen or rolled back large parts of its nuclear program and agreed to the most intrusive ever International Atomic Energy Agency inspections regime, it has received less than a billion dollars in sanctions relief per month. Most of this has been no more than access to its own money, currently frozen in the world banking system. (Iran is prevented from accessing almost \$100 billion in foreign reserves and oil sales proceeds.)

According to press reports, the agreement currently being negotiated in Lausanne is only two to three pages long. Even if ratified by Iran and the P-6, it is not likely to be publicly released.

However, it will reportedly stipulate certain specifics that will form the basis of an extensive technical agreement to be negotiated by June 30, the expiration date of the twice-extended interim nuclear deal. The specifics are said to include the duration of the agreement, the number of operational centrifuges Iran will be allowed, and a framework for the suspension and ultimate lifting of sanctions.

The US brought forward the unsubstantiated charge that Iran was developing nuclear weapons in 2003 in the immediate aftermath of Washington's illegal invasion of Iraq, justified by lies about Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction," and as it was initiating high-level planning for a regime-change war targeting Iran.

In the ensuing thirteen years, the US has repeatedly threatened Tehran with war, punished it with sanctions, and worked with Israel to disrupt Iran's nuclear program through cyber-attacks and the assassination of Iranian scientists.

In September 2013, the Obama administration came to the brink of a military strike against Syria, Iran's sole governmental ally in the region, a development Tehran warned would lead to war with Iran. But facing widespread popular opposition and divisions within the military-intelligence apparatus and ruling elite over US strategy in the region, the Obama administration pivoted to exploring the possibilities of a rapprochement with Tehran. Iran's rulers, for their part, had repeatedly indicated they were amenable to a deal with the US, a fact that was underlined by the coming to power of Hassan Rouhani as Iran's president.

In the intervening year and a half, the crisis in US policy in the Middle East has only deepened. Iran is now a tacit ally of the US in seeking to prop up a Shia-dominated, US-allied government in Baghdad against the Sunni Islamists of ISIS. At the same time, the US remains determined to oust the Assad regime from power in Damascus and is supporting a Saudi-led invasion of Yemen directed against the Houthi, a

Zaidi Shia rebel force that has received support from Tehran.

For the US, the nuclear conflict with Iran has always been about maintaining and extending US strategic dominance of the world's most important oil-exporting region. It is now considering whether to enlist Iranian support, at least temporarily, in seeking to restabilize the region under US domination.

On Friday, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif conceded that events in Yemen had been discussed on the sidelines of the Lausanne talks, but claimed that the talks' sole focus is the nuclear issue.

In his March 21 speech, Khamenei insisted that Iran "will not negotiate with America over regional matters," adding, "The goals of the Americans are exactly the opposite of our goals. We want security and calm in the region... the policy of the US in the region creates instability."

This declaration was undoubtedly for public consumption. Rouhani and his mentor, former Iranian President Rafsanjani, have frequently signaled the possibility that Iran and the US could work as partners in the region, including in Syria. Khamenei himself has repeatedly countenanced offers to the US, including most notoriously in 2003, when he authorized a proposed "grand bargain" under which Tehran would recognize Israel and cut off military support to Hezbollah and Hamas in exchange for a US commitment to abandon regime change in Tehran.

Important as the current situation in the Middle East is in the shaping of US policy toward Iran, even more significant is the Obama administration's pursuit of confrontation with Russia and China. Were the US able to harness Iran to its strategic objectives, it would remake the world geopolitical landscape, given Iran's strategic importance as the only state that straddles the energy-rich Middle East and Central Asia, and its significant economic ties to Beijing and military-strategic links to Russia.

Speaking last week, CIA Director John Brennan made clear that even in the event of a nuclear deal with Iran, Washington will not let up in its drive to force Tehran to abandon any challenge to US domination of the Middle East. Labeling Iran a "state sponsor of terrorism," Brennan declared, "What we have to do, whether there's a deal or not, is continue to keep pressure on Iran and to make sure that it is not able to continue to destabilize a number of the countries in the region."



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