

US, Israel condemn Russian missile deal with Iran

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Both Washington and Tel Aviv have condemned the decree signed Monday by Russian President Vladimir Putin lifting a ban on the delivery to of advanced S-300 air defense missile systems to the Iranian government.

The action by Moscow is seen by both the Obama administration and the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as cutting across US and Israeli threats to carry out air strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities.

The Israeli government has repeatedly threatened unilateral military action against Iran, while Washington has maintained that military action is an option that remains “on the table” should Tehran be deemed in violation of a nuclear agreement it is currently negotiating under the umbrella of the P5+1 grouping—the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany.

Amid the controversy over the revived Russian missile deal, the White House announced that President Barack Obama was prepared to sign the version of an Iran nuclear bill approved unanimously Tuesday by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee after the measure appeared to win sufficient Democratic support to override a presidential veto.

While the legislation would grant Congress the right to review any Iran nuclear accord, it explicitly recognizes that it does not have the right to approve or reject a deal reached by the US and the other major powers. It does provide a procedure for Congress to vote for or against lifting unilateral US sanctions that it legislated in the first place. Agreement on the bill could, however, fall apart in the face of Republican amendments linking the nuclear deal to Iran’s recognition of Israel or its ceasing of alleged support for “terrorism.”

Moscow imposed the voluntary ban on the shipment

of the surface-to-air missile batteries in 2010, responding to heavy pressure from both the US and Israel.

The missile deal, signed in 2007, was worth \$800 million to Russia’s state-controlled arms dealer, Rosoboronexport. Iran has in the meantime brought a \$4 billion lawsuit before the Geneva arbitration panel over Russia’s failure to fulfill the contract.

The Pentagon condemned Russia’s decision on the contract Monday. “Our opposition to these sales is long and public. We believe it unhelpful,” US military spokesman Col. Steve Warren told reporters. Asked whether Putin’s decree violated international sanctions against Iran, the Pentagon spokesman responded: “This is for our lawyer to really look through. Any sale of advanced technologies is cause of concern to us.”

A State Department spokesperson reported that Secretary of State John Kerry raised US concerns about the air-defense missile sale in a phone conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov Monday.

“We don’t believe it’s constructive at this time for Russia to move forward with this, but we’ve worked very closely with the Russians on the P5+1 negotiations,” said the spokesperson, Marie Harf. “We don’t think this will have an impact on unity in terms of inside the negotiating room.”

Asked if the missile deal would violate UN sanctions against Iran, she said flatly that it would not.

The head of the US negotiating team in the P5+1 talks, Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman, told the Israeli media Monday that, while the US maintained its military “alternatives” for dealing with Iran, bombing nuclear facilities would be only a short-term solution.

“A military strike by Israel or the US would only set back the nuclear program by two years,” she said. “You can’t bomb their nuclear know-how, and they

will rebuild everything. The alternatives are there, but the best option is a diplomatic negotiated solution.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who spoke by phone with Putin Tuesday, railed against both the lifting of the ban and the move toward an agreement on Iran’s nuclear program.

“The sale of advanced weapons to Iran is the result of the dangerous agreement that is emerging between Iran and the [P5+1] powers,” Netanyahu said. “After this arms deal, is there anyone who can seriously claim that the agreement with Iran will increase the security in the Middle East?”

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov defended the decision to go ahead with the missile delivery, stressing that the anti-aircraft missile system “is purely defensive in nature, is not suited for the purpose of attack, and does not jeopardize the safety of any state in the region, including, of course, Israel.”

Lavrov noted the voluntary character of the previous ban on the delivery, stating that it was put in effect to “stimulate progress in the negotiations,” which, with the reaching of a framework agreement on Iran’s nuclear program, was no longer necessary.

The Russian foreign minister also noted that as the result of the contract’s suspension, “Russia has not received large sums that are owed to us. We do not see the need for this anymore.”

Virtually simultaneously with the lifting of the ban on the delivery of the S-300 batteries, Russian officials announced the initiation of an oil-for-goods barter deal under which Russia will ship grain, equipment and construction materials to Iran in exchange for crude oil. The deal is said to be worth some \$20 billion.

Russia’s actions have clearly provoked concern in Washington and among its European allies. German Chancellor Angela Merkel Tuesday declared that countries that had imposed sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program should “lift those sanctions together, as far as possible.” She was speaking for German capitalist interests concerned that Russia is stealing a march on their plans to reap super-profits by reentering the Iranian market.

The decisions taken in Moscow are also, no doubt, meant to counter Washington’s own strategic calculations in pursuing the nuclear deal with Iran. To the extent that it can achieve an effective rapprochement with Iran, US imperialism can shift a

greater share of its military might from the region and direct it against both Russia and China.



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