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Washington's Hawks Provide Ammunition for Tehran's Hawks

By Muhammad Sahimi

January 29, 2015

The negotiations between Iran and P5+1 group – the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany – over limiting Iran's nuclear program have continued, and have been making progress. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif have met in Europe several times over the past two weeks, and both sides have expressed cautious optimism for reaching a comprehensive agreement by the deadline, which is at the end of June.

The apparent progress has worried the hardliners on both sides, particularly Washington's, who do not want any agreement at all. On the Iranian side the attacks by Tehran's hawks, led by hardline clerics, former and current commanders of the Revolutionary Guards, and the fundamentalist faction in the *Majles* [parliament] on the diplomatic efforts by the administration of President Hassan Rouhani and Zarif have continued unabated. As an example, during their recent meeting in Geneva, Kerry and Zarif had a 15-minute walk down Geneva sidewalks, and that provided a new excuse for the hardliners to summon Zarif to the Majles to explain why he had committed such an "exhibitionist" act, never mind that Saeed Jalili, Iran's hardline chief nuclear negotiator under former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, had done the same with William Burns, former Undersecretary of State. On Friday January 23, a petition was circulated by the hardliners during the Friday prayers all over the country, heaping scorn on Zarif.

On the American side, the efforts by the hawks and supporters of Israel and Saudi Arabia in Congress to impose new economic sanctions on Iran have continued. Senators Robert Menendez (D-NJ) and Mark Kirk (R-IL) have introduced legislation for the new sanctions that was supposed to be voted on this week, but under pressure by President Obama's allies, Menendez has postponed it until late March. The Republicans are also trying to pass another resolution demanding that any agreement with Iran must be put to a vote by Congress. Given the pro-Israel stance of Congress, it is clear how that vote would go.

But, that is not the end of Washington's hawks' efforts. During a press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the end of his December trip to Israel, after declaring that Iranians "lie, they cheat," Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) said, "But you [Netanyahu], above all others, have said that sanctions are what got Iran to the table, and it will be the only thing that brings them to a deal that we can all live with. ***I'm here to tell you, Mr. Prime Minister, that the Congress will follow your lead.***" [Emphasis is mine.] In effect, Graham asked a foreign government to tell the U.S. how to conduct its policy in the Middle East. If this is not treason, I do not know what is.

This is the same Senator Graham that, back in 2010, called for massive military attacks on Iran, saying,

So my view of military force would be not to just neutralize their nuclear program, which are probably dispersed and hardened, but to sink their navy, destroy their air force and deliver a decisive blow to the Revolutionary Guard. In other words, neuter that regime.

A very high percentage of White voters in South Carolina are Christian Zionists, ardent supporters of Israel, and so Graham must pander to them. He also is not an intelligent man. All one must do to see this is read his statement calling on the President to attack North Korea [and perhaps even China] for supposedly hacking Sony Pictures. Graham, a man who has never sponsored a meaningful piece of legislation that would help the working men and women of this country, has always supported war and imperial ambitions. He also speaks from both sides of his mouth. Last June, after the Islamic State, also known as ISIS and ISIL, took big chunks of territory in Iraq with lightning speed, the same Senator Graham called for working with Iran to defeat the IS. So, apparently Graham fantasized that after the US "neutered" Iran by destroying its military and killing tens of thousands in the process, Iranians will still spill their blood to protect his imperial ambitions in the Middle East.

Then, John Boehner, Speaker of the House, the "American traitor" according to Israel critic M.J. Rosenberg, and a leader of Israel's fifth column in the US, committed another treacherous act by inviting Netanyahu to speak to a joint session of Congress to rebut President Obama's policy on nuclear negotiations with Iran. To my knowledge, this is the first time in history that the Speaker of a country's parliament has asked a foreign power leader to speak in the parliament to undermine the country's president. Although the treacherous invitation has provoked wide condemnation, including one of Netanyahu's cheerleaders, Jeffrey Goldberg and some others on the right, it has not yet forced Boehner to un-invite Netanyahu.

Three well-known Iran chicken hawks, Dennis Ross, Eric Edelman, and Ray Takeyh penned a piece in which they demand that the Obama administration "take it to Tehran," claiming that the negotiations with Tehran have stalemated – I suppose because Tehran has not yet cried "uncle" – and that the President is not tough enough with Iran, after Obama imposed the most crippling economic sanctions in history on Iran. They advocated a "revamped coercive strategy." Another Washington chicken hawk, *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer, who for years has been hallucinating about Iran's non-existing nuclear weapon program, warned about "Iran's emerging empire," about repeating his brazen and worn out lie that "Iran is marching toward a nuclear bomb."

Make no mistake. All the propaganda by these "pundits" about imposing new sanctions on Iran to "strengthen US negotiation position" is simply fiction. What they really want is destroying the prospects for a negotiated settlement. That will lead to war with Iran, which in all likelihood will be transformed to World War III. Tom Cotton, the freshman Republican Senator from Arkansas, made this perfectly clear when he said explicitly that he wants "regime change" in Iran, for which he was praised by Jennifer Rubin, Likud's lobbyist at the *Washington Post*.

And, Tehran's hawks know all about these. The Iranian media quickly translates such statements and news, and the Iranian people often become aware of them even before the Americans do. Iranians know that Senator Kirk has said, "It's the reason why I ran for the Senate; [it] is all wrapped up in this battle. I am totally dedicated to the survival of the state of Israel in the 21st century." And, to help Israel Kirk has been ruthless with the Iranian people. When asked by a Chicago radio host, Ron Majors, "Once we get into sanctions and taking those kinds of actions, the argument immediately becomes, 'Are you really going after the government of the country, or are you taking food out of the mouths of the citizens'," to which Kirk responded, "It's okay to take the food out of the mouths of the [Iranian] citizens from a government that's plotting an attack directly on American soil." This is, of course, sheer nonsense. Iran has never plotted to attack the United States, even at the height of its revolutionary zeal in the early 1980s. Kirk was presumably referring to the claim that allegations that Iran had plotted to assassinate Saudi Arabia's ambassador in Washington, allegations that almost no one believed, were completely debunked, and quickly forgotten.

Iranians also know about Menendez's support for Mujahedin-e Khalgh (MEK), an organization that up until September of 2012 was listed as a foreign terrorist organization, and is universally despised by the Iranian people for many acts of terrorism that it committed in Iran during the 1980s and 1990s, and collaborated with Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war. Cotton is also a MEK supporter. Read here to learn how MEK essentially bought some members of Congress to help it come out of the terrorist list.

Such statements and efforts, which are against the true national interests of the United States, only provide ammunition for Tehran's hawks in their efforts to scuttle any agreement with Washington over Iran's nuclear program. Even though he endorsed the extension of the negotiation with P5+1, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has often expressed skepticism about a diplomatic resolution to the standoff over Iran's nuclear program, a skepticism that even the *New York Times* editors find not unfounded. His skepticism is based partly on what Washington's hawks are trying to do against Iran.

Using as a cover Khamenei's skepticism and Washington's hawks' efforts to start a war, Tehran's hawks have been relentless in their efforts to bring down the Rouhani administration. In their opposition to any nuclear agreement, Tehran's hardliners may be divided into two groups. In one group are those that are opposed to the US on ideological grounds. They believe that the United States never recognized the legitimacy of the Iranian revolution that toppled the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a staunch ally of the US, and has always wanted to topple the Islamic Republic. So, they argue that even if the nuclear issue is resolved, the US will look for another excuse to confront Iran. They might have a point, but blocking a nuclear agreement with the US is not the way to handle the issue.

In the second group are those that amassed vast illicit wealth as a result of the US economic sanctions imposed on Iran. Using the black market and the underground economy, on the one hand, and the US – Israel threats of military attacks on Iran, on the other hand, the hardliners associated with the military and intelligence forces not only silenced their critics, but also made tens of billions of dollars. In this they were allied with Ahmadinejad and his incompetent and corrupt administration.

Both groups of Tehran's hawks are terrified by the prospect of a nuclear agreement with the United States. They believe that the agreement, which will lead to lifting or at least suspending the economic sanctions, will also help open up the political space in Iran, helping the people to become better aware of their crimes, as a result of which they will lose their political and economic gains and power. But, while Khamenei tightly controls them, the same cannot be said about President Obama and Washington's hawks.

As I explained recently, the Rouhani administration has made meaningful and very significant concessions to the US and P5+1, which have frozen Iran's nuclear program and severely limited its scope. But, the fantasy that Netanyahu and his supporters in the US have for eliminating Iran's nuclear program is just that, a fantasy. It will not be materialized. Thus, cool and wise heads in Washington should prevail, prevent the hawks to feed Tehran's hawks by their pro-war stance, and make the most of a historic opportunity to address one of the most complex foreign policy issues that this country has faced for nearly four decades, namely, its relationship with Iran, the most important country in the Middle East, given its size, educated and generally pro-West population, strategic position, natural resources, and immense influence in the entire region.

The agreement will also change the dynamics of the Middle East for the better, which is, of course, what concerns the Arab nations of the Persian Gulf including Saudi Arabia, and Israel. They want to preserve the status quo, and that is why they do not want any agreement with Iran.

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