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How Neocons Sank Iran Nuke Deal

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By Robert Parry

Exclusive: Iran is resuming talks over its nuclear program with leading international powers – the United States, Britain, Russia, China, France and Germany – with the prospect of an agreement to swap some enriched uranium for research isotopes. But a similar plan was torpedoed by U.S. neocons in 2010, recalls Robert Parry.

Two years ago, Washington’s influential neoconservatives – both inside and outside government – shot down a possible resolution to the Iranian nuclear dispute because they wanted a confrontation with Tehran that some hoped would lead to their long-held dream of “regime change.”

In the ensuing two years, the cost of that confrontation has been high not just for Iranians, who have faced harsh sanctions, but for the world’s economy. For instance, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s recent escalation of bomb-Iran rhetoric contributed to the spike in gasoline prices that seems to be choking off the U.S. recovery, just as job growth was starting to accelerate.

But the Israelis and their neocon allies have yet to back away from the path toward war. They appear ready to take President Barack Obama to task if he makes any meaningful concessions to Iran in international negotiations that are set to resume in Istanbul, Turkey, on Friday.

A key question in those talks is whether some version of an earlier peace deal can be revived, whether Iran will agree to trade some of its enriched uranium – especially the amounts refined to

20 percent – for nuclear isotopes needed for medical research. That arrangement might let Iran retain its low-enriched uranium for energy production.

Along with verifiable commitments from Iran not to develop a nuclear bomb, such a deal might be enough for President Obama and the West to begin rolling back some of the toughest economic sanctions imposed on Iran, including restrictions on Iran's banking and oil sales.

However, it's also clear that any compromise would provoke fury from the neocons as well as war hawks in Congress and Israel. They all may claim they don't want a new war with Iran but still insist on a confrontational path that leads in that direction.

On Thursday, the neocon-dominated Washington Post editorialized that a deal might be within Obama's grasp to avert an immediate conflict with Iran, but "the risk is that it would be counterproductive in the medium term, because it would ease what is now mounting economic pressure on Iran and allow the regime breathing space."

The Post added: "It could leave the [Iranian] nuclear program in a stronger position than it was when the Obama administration began negotiations in the fall of 2009 — with more centrifuges and enough low-enriched uranium to make several nuclear bombs with further processing. If the regime refused a more comprehensive deal, or cheated, it might be difficult to restore sanctions that only now finally appear to be biting.

"With the presidential election looming, President Obama might be happy to trade those problems for avoiding a major international crisis in the coming months. For us, the call is closer. But most likely the Iranians themselves will settle the matter. For better or for worse, the chances the regime will meet Mr. Obama's terms don't look good."

Iranian Flexibility

In recent comments, key Iranians have signaled flexibility along the lines of the earlier swap arrangement, but the reason why such a deal might leave Tehran "in a stronger position" than in 2009-2010 is that then the Post's editors, along with other neocon pundits and allies inside the Obama administration, sank the earlier plan for Iran to surrender much of its low-enriched uranium for isotopes needed by an Iranian medical research reactor.

Iran had yet to overcome the technical obstacles to refine uranium to the 20 percent level to produce those isotopes. Now, Iran's 20 percent level is only a few steps short of bringing uranium to the 90 percent refinement for a nuclear bomb. So, the earlier deal would have left Iran much further from the threshold of a nuclear-bomb capability.

However, in 2009 – and again in 2010 – Washington's neocon voices ridiculed the proposed uranium swap on the grounds that Iran would have kept enough low-enriched uranium (at the much lower 3.5 percent level) that it could theoretically, sometime in the future, be able to refine it and build one nuclear bomb.

Today, Iran has much more enriched uranium at a much higher level, enough for at least several theoretical nuclear bombs (though Iran says it doesn't want any).

So, one could agree with the Post's assessment that Iran's nuclear position today is stronger than it was in 2009 and 2010. But whose fault was that? It would seem to rest more with the Post editorialists and other neocons who demanded the heightened confrontation with Iran in place of the uranium swap.

For instance, even before the revived swap deal was unveiled on May 17, 2010, the Washington Post's editors [were mocking](#) the leaders of Brazil and Turkey who had spearheaded the initiative. The Post called the plan "yet another effort to 'engage' the extremist clique of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad."

After the Iran-Brazil-Turkey deal was announced in Tehran, the rhetorical abuse escalated with Washington pundits and administration hardliners, like Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, treating the leaders of Brazil and Turkey as unwelcome interlopers who were intruding on America's diplomatic turf in an effort to grandstand.

On May 26, 2010, the influential New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman weighed in, excoriating the leaders of Brazil and Turkey for negotiating an agreement with Iran to ship about half its low-enriched uranium out of the country.

To Friedman, this deal was "as ugly as it gets," the title of [his column](#), though others might have had different ideas about what could be uglier, like the carnage in Iraq that Friedman and other neocon pundits had advocated seven years earlier.

But Friedman stuck the "ugly as it gets" label on the peace-seeking actions of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Brazil's then-President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who had persuaded Iran's President Ahmadinejad to accept an agreement to send 2,640 pounds of Iran's low-enriched uranium to Turkey in exchange for higher-enriched uranium that could only be put to peaceful medical uses.

That agreement followed one originally brokered by the Obama administration in fall 2009 before Iran's internal political tensions caused the deal to collapse.

A Perturbed Leader

After the revived deal encountered a hostile reaction in Official Washington in spring 2010, a perturbed Lula da Silva challenged those Americans who insisted that it was "none of Brazil's business" to act as an intermediary to resolve the crisis with Iran. "Who said it was a matter for the United States?" he asked.

The Brazilian president continued: "The blunt truth is, Iran is being presented as if it were the devil, that it doesn't want to sit down" to negotiate, despite the fact "Iran decided to sit down at the negotiating table. It wants to see if the others are going to go along with what (it) has done."

But Friedman's column delivered a political *coup de grace* to the swap idea. Instead, he signaled that the neocon bottom line was the ratcheting up of pressures on Iran with the goal of "regime change" or possibly a military assault on Iran's infrastructure.

Friedman portrayed the leaders of Brazil and Turkey as glory-seeking dupes, writing:

"I confess that when I first saw the May 17 [2010] picture of Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, joining his Brazilian counterpart, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, with raised arms — after their signing of a putative deal to defuse the crisis over Iran's nuclear weapons program — all I could think of was:

"Is there anything uglier than watching democrats sell out other democrats to a Holocaust-denying, vote-stealing Iranian thug just to tweak the U.S. and show that they, too, can play at the big power table? No, that's about as ugly as it gets."

This U.S. hostility toward the Iran-Brazil-Turkey accord caught Brazilian and Turkish officials by surprise, in part because Obama had encouraged the initiative.

After Friedman's column and other derogatory U.S. comments, Brazil released a three-page letter that Obama sent to Lula da Silva in April in which Obama said the proposed uranium swap "would build confidence and reduce regional tensions by substantially reducing Iran's" stockpile of low-enriched uranium.

The contrast between Obama's support and the anger from other voices in Washington caused "some puzzlement," one senior Brazilian official [said](#). After all, this official noted, the supportive "letter came from the highest authority and was very clear."

But, in 2010, the neocons were still dreaming about "regime change" in Iran, one of the charter members of President George W. Bush's "axis of evil." The neocons – and much of the U.S. press – also had deluded themselves into thinking that Ahmadinejad had "stolen" the June 2009 election from the so-called Green movement and that "regime change" was just around the corner.

"In my view, the 'Green Revolution' in Iran is the most important, self-generated, democracy movement to appear in the Middle East in decades," Friedman wrote. "It has been suppressed, but it is not going away, and, ultimately, its success — not any nuclear deal with the Iranian clerics — is the only sustainable source of security and stability. We have spent far too little time and energy nurturing that democratic trend and far too much chasing a nuclear deal."

'Regime Change' Argument

That argument ran parallel to the neocons' earlier case for war with Iraq, that "regime change" was the only acceptable outcome to that crisis. Thus, false or dubious claims about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction were justified to get the American public on board for war, just as the exaggerated fears about Iran's nuclear program became the new excuse for another bid at "regime change."

However, unlike Iraq which was ruled by dictator Saddam Hussein, the neocon goal of overthrowing Iran's government faced the unacknowledged reality that Ahmadinejad almost certainly won the June 12, 2009, election and that he thus was a popularly elected leader (at least within the rules of Iran's Islamic Republic).

Though the U.S. press corps refused to accept that fact – and still routinely describes the election as “fraudulent,” “rigged” or “stolen,” the reality was that no serious evidence has been presented to support those claims.

Indeed, the overwhelming evidence is that Ahmadinejad, with strong support from the poor especially in more conservative rural areas, defeated the “Green Revolution” candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi by roughly the 2-to-1 margin of the official results.

For instance, an analysis by the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes concluded that most Iranians voted for Ahmadinejad and viewed his reelection as legitimate, contrary to claims made by much of the U.S. news media.

Not a single Iranian poll analyzed by PIPA – whether before or after the June 2009 election, whether conducted inside or outside Iran – showed Ahmadinejad with less than majority support. None showed Mousavi, a former prime minister, ahead or even close.

“These findings do not prove that there were no irregularities in the election process,” said Steven Kull, director of PIPA. “But they do not support the belief that a majority rejected Ahmadinejad.” [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's “[Ahmadinejad Won, Get Over It!](#)”]

If these and other scholarly examinations are correct – and there is no counter-evidence that they aren't – what happened after the election was that Mousavi simply refused to accept the voters' choice and – with the enthusiastic backing of the U.S. news media – undertook to reverse the results with massive street protests.

During those demonstrations, a few protesters threw Molotov cocktails at police (scenes carried on CNN but quickly forgotten by the U.S. news media) and security forces overreacted with repression and violence.

Though it's fair to condemn excessive force used by Iran's police, you can be sure that if the same factors were transplanted to an American ally – or, say, the United States itself – the U.S. news media's treatment would be completely different. Suddenly, the security forces would be protecting “democracy” from anti-democratic mobs disgruntled over losing.

But Friedman and other neocon pundits took this false conventional wisdom – that Mousavi was the voters' choice – and transformed it into a new *casus belli*, a pattern of turning propaganda into political truth that was eerily reminiscent of the black-and-white portrayals of the crisis with Iraq in 2002-2003.

‘Tony Blair Democrat’

In those days, Friedman was enamored of the idea of invading Iraq and was smitten by British Prime Minister Tony Blair's glib oratory about forcibly planting seeds of "democracy." Friedman even dubbed himself a pro-war "Tony Blair Democrat" and made the witty observation that it was time to "give war a chance" in Iraq.

Today, it might seem obvious that anyone foolish enough to call himself "a Tony Blair Democrat" – after Blair has gone down in history as "Bush's poodle" – or to twist John Lennon's advice to "give peace a chance" into its opposite should have the decency to simply vacate the public stage and let some other aspiring pundit try his or her luck.

But that's not how it works in the world of U.S. punditry. As long as you don't offend the powerful, you keep your job, and when the carousel circles around, you're poised to reach for another brass ring – another glorious war, another lucrative book contract.

Friedman also hasn't heard any anti-Iranian propaganda theme that he won't repeat, much like he did in hyping threats from Iraq.

Surely, Ahmadinejad, like Saddam Hussein, has contributed to his and his nation's problems with wrongful actions and stupid rhetoric, making the work of neocon propagandists all the easier. But the truth is that actions of any national leader can be made to appear more outrageous or more reasonable depending on how the media frames these matters.

For example, Ahmadinejad, a little-educated populist from the Tehran's "street," has made obnoxious and ill-informed comments questioning the Holocaust. However, to extrapolate Ahmadinejad's offensive remarks into a readiness to attack Israel, which has hundreds of undeclared nukes, is the kind of illogical overreach that we saw before the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Back then, the Bush administration conjured up nightmare scenarios of Iraq flying unmanned planes over the United States to spray poison gases or secretly building a nuclear bomb that it might give to Islamic radicals (though the secular Saddam Hussein was infamous for his brutal repression of those religious fundamentalists).

It's also should be clearer today that the mercurial Ahmadinejad has been largely sidelined by Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, a more predictable figure who has renounced any Iranian interest in developing a nuclear bomb, calling possession of such a weapon a "grave sin."

Still, the neocons are itching for another conflict, this time with Iran, and they are sure to condemn any concessions that Obama makes in the upcoming negotiations. However, if an eventual deal does end up more favorable to Iran than the one available in 2010, the neocons will have themselves to blame.