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Baghdad talks on Iran's nuclear program unresolved

By Peter Symonds
24 May 2012

Talks in Baghdad yesterday between Iran and the P5+1—the US, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany—over Tehran's nuclear programs reportedly ended late last night without any agreement or statement. The discussion is likely to be extended into today.

Unofficial comments to the media indicate that sharp differences emerged after the US and its allies unveiled proposals requiring major concessions by Iran, but offering little in return. Virtually all of the existing sanctions will remain in place and harsh new US and European Union (EU) measures, aimed at crippling Iran's banking system and oil exports, will still come into force on July 1.

The deal put to Iran by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton apparently insisted on an immediate halt to the production of 20 percent enriched uranium and the shipment of its present stockpile out of the country. While often described in the Western media as “highly enriched uranium”, this nuclear material is well short of the 90 percent enriched level required to build a nuclear weapon. The 20 percent enriched uranium is needed to fuel a research reactor in Tehran that produces medical isotopes.

The US and EU are also demanding that Iran shut down and dismantle its Fordo enrichment plant near the city of Qom. The plant, which is buried deep under a mountain, is relatively impervious to air strikes. In other words, Iran is being required to ensure that its nuclear facilities are vulnerable to a pre-emptive military attack, which both the US and Israel continue to threaten.

Even more galling for the Iranian government is the continued US insistence that it must ultimately halt all uranium enrichment, including low enriched uranium required to fuel its power reactor. Under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, signatories like Iran are guaranteed the right to conduct all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle—including uranium enrichment—for peaceful purposes such as energy production.

Iran is reportedly being offered a promise of no new sanctions beyond those already announced, easier access to aircraft spare parts and a possible suspension of an EU ban on insurance for ships carrying Iranian oil. As the *Financial Times* pointed out, the EU was already reviewing the insurance ban, amid concerns that Japan and South Korea would be compelled to halt all oil imports from Iran, destabilising the international oil market.

Prior to yesterday's talks, the Iranian regime had reached a tentative agreement with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief Yukiya Amano on procedures to settle what the IAEA claims are "possible military dimensions" of Iran's nuclear program. Iran denies any plans to build nuclear weapons and alleges that much of the IAEA evidence—supplied by unnamed intelligence agencies—is a forgery. Tehran has objected to intrusive IAEA inspections of non-nuclear sites, such as the Parchin military base.

By reaching an agreement with Amano on Monday, the Iranian regime had clearly been hoping for some signs of goodwill from the US and EU at the Baghdad talks yesterday, but received none.

An unnamed Iranian diplomat told the *Christian Science Monitor* that what was being demanded in Baghdad was not what was agreed at last month's meeting in Istanbul—that talks were meant to be "reciprocal, simultaneous and... balanced" in their value to each side. "This is what we were afraid of," he continued. "No one is going to accept these things this way. The 20 percent and shutting down Fordo, in return for nothing? Nothing?"

Existing US, EU and UN sanctions are already heavily affecting the Iranian economy. An article this week in the *Wall Street Journal* described the situation: "Economists inside Iran say inflation is above 50 percent annually and prices for basic daily goods such as dairy products, meat and rice increase weekly... Dozens of factories across Iran, in sectors ranging from dairy to steel, had shut down and over 100,000 workers had been laid off in the past year, a union of contract workers said last week."

The site of the talks—Baghdad—is a reminder that a decade ago the US set Iraq the impossible task of proving that there were no "weapons of mass destruction" or the capacity to make them anywhere in its territory. In a desperate effort to forestall war, the Iraqi regime opened up all of its facilities to inspection, including the presidential palaces, but to no avail.

Iran faces the same prospect even if it makes concessions. Not only does the Iranian regime confront further devastating sanctions at the end of next month, but the US and Israel continue to menace the country with a unilateral military attack. Washington's primary aim is not the dismantling of Iran's nuclear program but the fashioning of a regime in Tehran more conducive to US economic and strategic interests in the Middle East and Central Asia.

In remarks leaked to the media, US ambassador to Israel, Dan Shapiro, told a meeting of the Israeli bar association last week that the military option was not only on the table, as President Obama has repeatedly declared, but was set to be used. He said that the option was “not just available, but it’s ready. The necessary planning has been done to ensure that it’s ready.”

Shapiro said that “some time, not an unlimited amount of time” was left for negotiations, adding: “At a certain point, we may have to make a judgment that the diplomacy will not work.”

British newspapers reported yesterday that the country’s National Security Council has been advised by the Foreign Office and intelligence agencies of a “25 percent to 50 percent” chance that the nuclear confrontation with Iran will end in war. The *Guardian* noted: “Ministers have also been told the US appears to have been stockpiling fuel and defence equipment at its bases in the Gulf, in a slow and discreet build-up that has been continuing for up to a year.”

The Pentagon has doubled the number of aircraft carrier battle groups in or near the Persian Gulf from one to two and dispatched sophisticated F-22 warplanes to the region to bolster its ability to attack Iran. According to the *Guardian*, the US has called on Britain to send minesweepers to the Gulf and might be “asked to contribute directly to strikes against Iran.” The British contribution could involve bombers sent directly from the UK and cruise missiles fired from the British submarine, HMS Triumph, which is stationed in the region.

The Israeli government, which has also repeatedly threatened to attack Iran, is demanding that the P5+1 talks ensure an end to all Iranian uranium enrichment—a demand that Tehran is highly unlikely to concede. Defence Minister Ehud Barak stated on Tuesday: “Israel believes that a clear bar should be set for Iran that won’t leave any room for any window or crack for Iran to proceed toward military nuclear capacity. It’s forbidden to make any concessions to Iran. World powers’ demands must be clear and unequivocal.”

Even if a deal is reached today in Baghdad, it is unlikely to satisfy Israel. Whatever the outcome of negotiations, the continuing danger of an illegal pre-emptive attack on Iran by the US or Israel threatens a war that could rapidly engulf the entire region.