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US in secret talks with Hezbollah

By Keith Jones

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Washington has reportedly begun secret talks with Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia militia closely allied with Iran, and whose fighters have helped Syria's government withstand a US- and Saudi-backed Sunni Islamist insurgency.

Britain is reportedly facilitating the negotiations. According to stories in the Kuwaiti press that were subsequently confirmed by the *Jerusalem Post*, British diplomats are meeting with Hezbollah representatives to apprise them of the Obama administration's demands and deliver their responses to Washington.

This roundabout method has supposedly been adopted because the US officially designates both Hezbollah's military and political wings as terrorist organizations, making it illegal for US officials to meet Hezbollah leaders.

The revelation of the US-Hezbollah talks comes just days after the US and its allies reached an interim agreement with Iran over its nuclear program. Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime and its regional allies— including Hezbollah, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's regime, and the Palestinian group Islamic Jihad—have hailed this agreement as a “victory.”

In fact, Iran agreed to roll back its nuclear program and subject it to unprecedentedly intrusive inspections regime in exchange for the US and European Union relaxing only a small fraction of the punitive economic sanctions that have crippled Iran's economy.

Revelations of wide-ranging US negotiations with Iran's Middle East allies underscore that the US disputes with Iran were about far more than simply its nuclear program. Washington is moving to mend relations with various Shia populist or bourgeois nationalist forces across the Middle East in order to more effectively dominate the world's leading oil-exporting region.

Fearing that Iran's economic crisis could provoke working class-led social unrest, the leadership of the Islamic Republic has signaled that it is ready to make huge concessions to Washington. These include giving the US and European Union energy giants privileged access to Iran's oil and natural gas and assisting Washington in suppressing opposition to its foreign policy across the Middle East, from Afghanistan to Lebanon.

"If in Geneva a deal was struck, doors to other deals might be possible" an unnamed "senior Iranian official" told the Washington-based *Al-Monitor* this week. "Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and also Afghanistan just a few weeks before the United States withdraws." In a message clearly directed at Israel and Saudi Arabia—US regional allies who for their own strategic reasons fear a rapprochement between Washington and Tehran—the Iranian official added: "We prefer that regional powers understand new details are to be added to the equation."

Over the past week, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif have launched a diplomatic charm offensive aimed at US allies in region. At the beginning of the week, Turkey's foreign minister visited Tehran and, at a press conference with Zarif, made a joint appeal for an immediate cease-fire and political settlement in Syria. On Thursday, it was the turn of the UAE foreign minister to be welcomed to Tehran.

Iran has also announced it is considering an invitation from Bahrain to visit the capital, Manama. In an attempt to reassure the kingdom's Sunni rulers of its support, it stressed that Iran did not instigate the popular revolt against the monarchy mounted by Bahrain's majority-Shia population.

Rouhani's mentor, former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, has announced that he is ready to travel to Saudi Arabia to mend Tehran's relations with Riyadh. In an interview with the *Financial Times*, Rafsanjani, who has repeatedly indicated his unhappiness with Tehran's backing for the Syrian regime, said Iran "could play a better role" in Syria. He added that "we have no right to interfere" if Syrians want Assad to go.

As the interim nuclear deal was being finalized last weekend, the Obama administration let it be known that it had initiated secret talks with Iran last March and that these talks, which continued over the next six months, paved the way for the nuclear accord.

The Kuwaiti daily, *Al-Rai*, said the indirect talks between Washington and Hezbollah had been confirmed by senior British diplomatic sources. The *Jerusalem Post* cited “diplomatic sources in Washington” as saying the talks “are aimed at keeping tabs on the changes in the region and the world, and [to] prepare for the upcoming return of Iran to the international community.”

The US is exploring to what extent Hezbollah is prepared to accommodate US strategic interests. Immediately at issue is Hezbollah’s role in the Syrian war and its readiness to assist the US in working out a “political solution” that would see much of the US-backed, Islamist-led opposition brought into a “transitional government” in Damascus.

Less than three months ago the Obama administration was on the brink of launching war on Syria, a war that could have rapidly triggered war with Iran. Instead, it has chosen to see if it can harness Tehran to its strategic agenda, using it and its allies to help stabilize the region under US hegemony. One of its leading concerns is concentrating its military resources on the so-called “pivot to Asia”—an effort to militarily isolate, and if necessary, confront China.

Like Tehran, Hezbollah has indicated that it is looking for a bargain, welcoming Tehran’s own overtures to the US and entering into secret talks with Washington. So as not to disrupt this process, both Tehran and Hezbollah have chosen to downplay the significance of the November 19 bombing at Iran’s Lebanese embassy, which killed 6 Iranians and 17 passers-by in a Shia Beirut neighborhood dominated by Hezbollah.

Israel, meanwhile, is clearly disturbed by the reports of secret talks between Washington and Hezbollah. While there has been no official Israeli comment, within hours of the talks being revealed, the *Jerusalem Post* carried a report that claimed it has learned from army sources that Hezbollah “is carrying out massive preparations” for war with Israel.

The report begins: “On both sides of the Israel-Lebanon border, the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) and Hezbollah are quietly and intensively preparing for the next clash between them, a conflict both expect will surpass previous wars, in the scope of firepower each side will seek to employ.”