

Despite talks, US-Iran confrontation continues

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Negotiations in Istanbul on Saturday between Iran and the P5+1 grouping—the US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany—have done nothing to defuse the tense standoff over Iran’s nuclear programs. None of the substantive issues was discussed, let alone resolved; even as harsh new sanctions on Iran are due to come into effect in July and the US and Israel continue to threaten military action against Tehran.

Eight hours of talks produced a decision to hold further discussions in Baghdad on May 23 over a “confidence building” agreement. European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, who presided at the Istanbul meeting, told the media that the negotiations had been “constructive and useful,” but acknowledged that neither side had addressed specific issues.

As far as “confidence building” is concerned, the onus is all on Iran. Ashton told CNN that the steps to be discussed in Baghdad “will be designed to build the confidence that there isn’t going to be a nuclear weapons program. That might be, for example, enabling inspectors to have more access [to Iran].”

The US has made clear that Iran must make major concessions. In the lead up to the talks in Istanbul, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton insisted that Iran’s rejection of nuclear weapons was not a matter of “abstract belief.” It had to involve shipping Iran’s 20 percent enriched uranium out of the country and “constant inspections and verifications.”

Iran requires uranium enriched to 20 percent as fuel for a research reactor in Tehran that produces medical isotopes. This level is well short of the 90 percent enrichment required for nuclear weapons. All Iran’s nuclear facilities and stockpiles of enriched uranium are already monitored and inspected by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu scathingly described the Istanbul meeting as a “freebie” for Iran. “It has got five weeks to continue enrichment without any limitation, any inhibition. I think Iran should take immediate steps to stop all enrichment, take out all enriched material and dismantle the nuclear facility in Qom,” he said.

Israel’s demand that Iran dismantle its Fordo enrichment plant near the city of Qom is especially provocative. Netanyahu and Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak have repeatedly issued thinly disguised threats of military strikes against Iran’s nuclear facilities. Closing the heavily defended Fordo plant would leave all Iran’s nuclear programs open to Israeli attack.

The Israeli defence minister has declared 2012 as “a critical year” for stopping Iran. The Obama administration has echoed this rhetoric in recent weeks, stating on several occasions that “time is short” and billing the current P5+1 talks as the last chance for negotiations.

President Obama has underscored the threat by declaring that his policy toward Iran is not one of containment, but of prevention—that is, the US will take all measures, including military attacks, to halt Iran’s nuclear programs.

An unnamed senior US official told the *Financial Times*: “We all understand that we do not have an indeterminate amount of time.” Another unnamed diplomat said: “We may need more meetings after Baghdad. But my masters will not be happy if we are still mucking around like this towards the end of the year. Our patience is great but the world is a dangerous place.”

Top Iranian negotiator Saaed Jalali reiterated Iran’s rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, including to enrich uranium. He pointedly addressed the media in front of a banner with pictures of five Iranian nuclear scientists assassinated over the past three years—in all likelihood by Israel operating with tacit US support.

Before the Istanbul meeting, Jalali indicated that Iran might consider steps in relation to its 20 percent enriched uranium, but would expect reciprocal actions such as the easing of international sanctions. Punitive US and European measures have impacted severely on the Iranian economy, producing a 50 percent drop in the value of its currency. Further sanctions to be imposed at the end of January include a European ban on Iranian oil imports and harsh US penalties against countries and corporations doing business with Iran.

The prospects for an agreement in Baghdad are slim. Even if Iran were to concede all the US demands, more would follow. The US is demanding that Iran prove the impossible—in effect that it has no future intention of building nuclear weapons and that nowhere in its territory does it have the capacity to do so.

In reality, Washington is using the nuclear issue as a convenient pretext to fashion a regime in Tehran, by war if necessary, conducive to American economic and strategic interests. Iran is central to the broader US strategy of shoring up its dominant position in the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia and undermining the influence of other countries, including China and Russia.

The latest round of P5+1 talks is a useful expedient for the Obama administration. The meetings allow the US to paint Iran as a “rogue state” if and when they fail. At the same time, the talks put pressure on Israel to hold off on any attack Iran until the process is completed. While Israel and the US are the closest of allies, there are tactical differences over the timing of any military strikes. At this stage, Obama has indicated he does not want an attack before the US presidential election in November.

At the same time, the Pentagon has boosted its forces in the Persian Gulf in preparation for a war against Iran. A lengthy article in the *Wall Street Journal* on Saturday reviewed the build-up, including the doubling of the US fleet of Avenger-class mine-sweeping ships and the fitting of US warships with sophisticated weapons to counter Iranian torpedoes and small patrol boats. The US military is also “rushing to upgrade its largest conventional bomb to better penetrate fortified [Iranian] underground facilities.” The US navy had already doubled the number of its aircraft carriers in or near the Persian Gulf.

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