

US and Iran Set to Meet at UN

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The Obama administration confirmed Monday that US Secretary of State John Kerry is scheduled to meet with his Iranian counterpart Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif this week, the first such high-level contact between the two governments since the 1979 Iranian revolution overthrew the US-backed dictatorship of the Shah.

The meeting, which will take place in conjunction with the opening of the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, will include the other members of the so-called P5+1—Britain, China, France, Russia and Germany—the group of countries which have conducted diplomatic negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program.

The White House Monday downplayed speculation that President Barack Obama will stage some kind of symbolic encounter with newly-elected Iranian President Hasan Rouhani, both of whom are set to address the opening session of the UN General Assembly today.

White House spokesman Jay Carney told reporters Monday that the US was willing to hold talks with Iran, “commensurate with a willingness by Iran to be serious about dealing with its nuclear weapons program.” The Iranian government has consistently denied that there is any such program and insisted that its nuclear activities are dedicated to peaceful purposes. US intelligence estimates have substantiated that Iran has no ongoing nuclear weapons program.

Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes adopted a similar tack, insisting that the draconian sanctions imposed by Washington and its allies was necessary to “prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, but that the Obama administration was also holding “open the door to a diplomatic solution so that we can achieve a resolution to this issue that prevents Iran from getting a nuclear weapon while allowing them access to peaceful nuclear power consistent with the nonproliferation obligations.”

The absence of any evidence that Iran is conducting anything other than the development of peaceful nuclear technology in full compliance with international treaties has not kept Washington and the US corporate media from presenting a nuclear-armed Iran as an imminent threat—justifying not only economic sanctions that punish its more than 76 million people, but also direct military attack.

Earlier, Rhodes warned, “We’ve always made clear that there’s not an open-ended window for diplomacy,” an implicit threat that if Tehran does not bow to US imperialism’s demands, it can expect military aggression.

The election of Rouhani, who took office last month, was driven in large part by the desire of Iranians to escape the sanctions regime. Sanctions have driven unemployment up sharply,

saddled Iran with a nearly 40 percent inflation rate, and cut oil revenues in half. Formerly the second-largest oil producer in the Organization of Petroleum Producing Countries, it has fallen to sixth place. And, while medicine is supposedly exempt from sanctions, threats to banks and shippers for dealing with Iran have effectively cut off imports, leading to widespread shortages and a growing number of deaths.

Before leaving for the UN meeting, Rouhani told reporters in Tehran: "On this trip, I will try to deliver the voice of the oppressed people of Iran to the world, and we should say that sanctions are an illegal and unacceptable path."

Signaling the attempt by the Iranian bourgeoisie to shift relations with US imperialism and its allies, Mohammad Khatami, who was Iran's president from 1997 to 2005 and remains a key figure in the "reformist" faction of the Iranian regime, wrote in an op-ed piece for the British daily *Guardian* Monday that Rouhani was coming to New York with an "agenda for change" providing "an unrivaled and possibly unrepeatable opportunity for Iran, the West, and all local and regional powers."

He added that Rouhani enjoys "explicit public support" from Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei for reaching "a diplomatic resolution of a number of foreign policy issues with the west, not just the nuclear issue."

There are clear signs of divisions within the Iranian regime, however. On the eve of Rouhani's trip to New York, Iran's politically powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps warned, "Historical experiences make it necessary for the diplomatic apparatus of our country to carefully and skeptically monitor the behavior of White House officials, so that the righteous demands of our nation are recognized and respected by those who favor interaction."

Nuclear talks between the major world powers and Iran have been stalled for the last eight years, with the last round of negotiations taking place in Kazakhstan in April. As with previous sessions, it broke down as the US and its allies presented ultimatums to Iran to halt uranium enrichment activities that are consistent with the Non-Proliferation Treaty to which it is a signatory, while offering only minimal changes to what is in effect an economic blockade of the country.

A bipartisan group of US Senators addressed letters to Obama Monday, urging no significant change in this policy.

"Iran must show it is serious about reaching a legitimate diplomatic solution accompanied by full and verifiable compliance. Talks cannot be merely a stalling tactic, while Iran continues to move forward with aggressive enrichment of uranium," Senators Charles Schumer (Democrat from New York) and John McCain (Republican-Arizona) wrote to Obama.

They urged no easing of sanctions. "Now is not the time to let up on this pressure," Schumer and McCain wrote. "Removal of any existing sanctions must depend on Iran's halting of its nuclear program. Conversely, the continuation or expansion of its nuclear activities will only lead to more sanctions led by the United States and our friends and allies."

Similarly, Democratic Senator Robert Menendez, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Republican Lindsey Graham addressed an open letter to the US president warning that "However, whatever nice words we may hear from Mr. Rouhani, it is

Iranian action that matters.”

Earlier this year, Menendez and Graham presented a resolution in the Senate urging Washington to give a green light for an Israeli military strike on Iran and for the US to provide “diplomatic, military and economic support” to the Israeli regime in the event of such an attack.

Their response to Rouhani’s overtures dovetails with that of Israel. Last week, the office of Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu issued a statement dismissing Rouhani’s offers to negotiate. “The true test is not Rouhani’s words, but rather the deeds of the Iranian regime, which continues to aggressively advance its nuclear program while Rouhani is giving interviews,” it said.

Like the unsubstantiated charge that Syria used chemical weapons against its population, the allegations about the Iranian nuclear program have never been anything more than a pretext for aggression against Iran, which is viewed as an obstacle to the imposition of US imperialist hegemony over the oil-rich and strategically critical regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

Whatever negotiations Washington enters into will be aimed extracting concessions that would further cripple Iran, leaving it more vulnerable to future US military intervention.

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