

War Party in a Bind: After Nuclear Talks in Geneva, Iran Will Likely Agree

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The meeting in Geneva on July 19, between representatives of the 5+1 (U.N. Security Council permanent members plus Germany) and Iran, should be heartily welcomed by all those who seek a diplomatic solution to the hoked-up case against the Islamic Republic's nuclear energy program, and, thus, an end to the threat of a new war in the region. Although, as both sides stressed, no final agreement was struck at the talks, the fact that they took place at all was significant. The presence in Geneva, of Undersecretary of State William Burns, signalled the first time that the U.S. has officially met with the Iranians since the 1979 revolution, if one excludes the multilateral gatherings on Afghanistan and on Iraq. It is highly likely that the Geneva talks will lead to agreement between the West and Iran.

Yet, the spin in the establishment press on the event, has been most unhelpful, often bordering on sabotage. One line had it that, since the Iranians did not immediately bow down and lisp, "Yes, sir," to the call for a freeze on its uranium enrichment activities, they were rejecting the 5+1's bargaining position tout court. Others claimed Tehran were only stalling, in hopes of averting any military aggression until the U.S. elections in November. Still others seized on reports of Iranian military maneuvers, conducted prior to the talks, as "proof" of Tehran's commitment to develop nuclear weapons to destroy Israel. Regional military manoeuvres by Iran, which came on the heels of Israeli exercises simulating attacks on the Islamic Republic, featured the firing of 9 middle-range missiles. In response, Secretary of State Condi Rice issued usual complaints, and both presumptive Presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama reiterated that Iran is "a threat."

Nonetheless, the talks in Geneva did take place, and should be taken as grounds for optimism — cautious, to be sure — but optimism. There are several reasons for this. First, the decision to accept negotiations on the basis of the 5+1 proposal delivered in Iran by Javier Solana on June 14, was taken at the highest level of policy-making in Tehran, i.e. by Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of the Revolution. All the leading Iranian spokesmen who signalled assent to the proposal, are answerable to Khamenei. These include Saeed Jalili, head of the Supreme National Security Council, and, in that capacity, chief negotiator on nuclear questions; Gholam-Reza Aghezadeh, head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Agency, who on June 30 told a parliamentary committee the decision for talks had been made; Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki; and, foreign policy advisor to Khamenei, Ali Akhbar Velayati.

As if to eliminate any doubts on the matter, Khamenei himself explicitly endorsed the talks. As reported on his official website, www.Khamenei.ir on July 16, the Supreme Leader stated: "The negotiations will proceed successfully only when the atmosphere of the negotiations is not dominated by threats. Europeans have to pay attention to the point that it is the Iranian

nation that they are negotiating with. The Iranian nation is a valiant nation that does not like threats, and is not going to give in to any threats.” Khamenei also expressed his full confidence in the bodies dealing with the issue, the Supreme National Security Council which “is in charge of the nuclear issue and is presided over by the esteemed president. Whatever the president and the officials in charge of the nuclear issue say is also approved by all the government officials. And the heads of the three government branches and my representatives are pursuing this issue in the Supreme National Security Council with wisdom and commitment.” The top official said “the red lines of the Iranian nation are absolutely clear,” and will not be crossed. This was a reference to demands that Iran suspend its enrichment program completely, in essence, giving it up entirely.

A second reason for optimism, is that, on the other side, a “new atmosphere” had been created, which helped leading Iranian figures to overcome their skepticism. In remarks to CNN on July 7, Mottaki noted the new atmosphere, saying, “We believe that the nature of our exchanges, both in format and in substance, were different than of previous times.” He went on, “So I believe that we are now in a new environment with a new approaching perspective...” Mottaki also referred to the upcoming elections in the U.S., as a possible moment of transition. “We hear new voices in America,” he said, “We see new approaches, and we think that the rational thinkers in America can, based on these new approaches, see the reality as it is.”

Mottaki was upbeat about the new atmosphere, also because Solana had acknowledged the importance of Iran on the world stage. On June 15, Tehran Times quoted the Eu foreign policy czar as saying the 5+1 “fully recognize Iran’s right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes,” adding, “We want to have a fully normalized relationship in all fields, in particular the nuclear field.” He said Iran was “a very important and civilized country which plays a very important role in the international arena.”

The meeting in Geneva lasted several hours on July 19. As noted, no concrete breakthrough agreement occurred. According to reports, the 5+1 group formally presented the “freeze-for-freeze” proposal that Solana had offered earlier in oral form to the Iranians, and the Iranians declined to give an immediate, formal answer. Thus the skepticism and the press spin. Iran reportedly delivered a two-page “non-paper” to the 5+1, whose contents have not been made public. The New York Times on July 22 leaked parts of the non-paper, according to which Tehran requested three further meetings with Solana and four meetings at the foreign ministers’ level, beginning after a halt in sanctions against Iran.

In Geneva, the 5+1 gave Iran two weeks’ time to formulate a final response to their offer. This was followed by a public statement by Secretary of State Condi Rice, who complained that Iran was “meandering” and engaging in “small talk,” and added that either Iran must accept, “or face growing isolation and the collective response of not just one nation but of all nations around the world.” Furthermore, new military manuevres were announced. The U.S., France, Britain and Brazil were to start 10-day exercises off the coast from Virginia to Florida, “aimed at training for operation in shallow coastal waters such as the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz,” according to PressTV (www.payvand.com/news/08/jul/1216.html).

All that notwithstanding, the fact is, a high-level U.S. diplomat, William Burns, took part in the talks. This was a crucial victory for the Iranians, who have been demanding direct contact without preconditions. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was most unusually explicit in his praise for the U.S. gesture. Speaking on July 23 to a gathering in Yasouj city in southwestern Iran, he stated: “The U.S. administration announced it was going to participate

in nuclear talks. We welcomed that. The U.S. representative spoke in a gentlemanly tone in the meeting. It was positive." According to an AP wire on July 23, Ahmadinejad said Burns's presence "was a step towards recognizing the rights of the Iranian nation, towards justice, towards repairing your image in the world, towards cleaning 50 years of crimes you committed against the Iranian nation." Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki had also characterized the announcement that Burns would participate, as "a positive development."

In the view of Iranian sources, the presence of Burns signalled a victory (at least temporary) of the anti-war forces in Washington, over the Cheney-led war party. Reports from Washington have it that Condi Rice dispatched Burns, over the objections of the vice president. Rice's move was a political gesture which was generated, however, by a concerted action on the part of the top brass in the U.S. military establishment. Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff Mullen had been to Israel where he was presumably briefed on the Israeli hawks' blueprint for military attacks against Iran. Without revealing the details of his discussions, Muller made clear that he would not rubber stamp any such insane designs. After his talks, he said that opening a third front in the region was out of the question.

Why Did Iran Go To Geneva?

The block to direct talks had been the insistence, on the part of the 5+1, that Iran {suspend} its uranium enrichment as a precondition, which Tehran had consistently refused. Now, although the {written} letter of the 5+1 countries' foreign ministers, accompanying their proposal, still explicitly said, "Formal negotiations can start as soon as Iran's enrichment-related and reprocessing activities are suspended," Solana did make an {oral} offer to start talks, once Iran had agreed to a "freeze" on its enrichment activities, at least for the duration of the negotiations (See Trita Parsi, "Reading Solana in Tehran," www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=43097 and www.tritaparsi.com). This idea of a freeze, meaning Iran would continue to enrich but at current levels, had been discussed informally in the Iranian press, and in most concrete terms by two prominent Iranians at a conference in Berlin at the end of June (See my article, "Iranians Float An Offer the West Should Not Refuse," globalresearch.ca June 19). The virtue of the freeze approach lies in the fact that it allows both sides to save face: Iran does not submit to demands to suspend (i.e. halt, even temporarily) its enrichment, but the other side can argue that Iran is not expanding its program.

Much has been written about Tehran's motives for accepting the talks. Some claim Iran was reacting to threats of military aggression by the U.S. and/or Israel. But this hypothesis, as Trita Parsi has elaborated, does not hold water; were Iran to respond this way to threats, it would have done so much earlier, when the threats were even more direct. More credible is the argument, that Iran found the moment propitious, because the other side appeared to accept, at least in part, its terms. First and foremost is the idea of the freeze, rather than suspension. Secondly, the 5+1, at least in the person of Solana, displayed a new quality of respect regarding Iran. This factor, which many dismiss as irrelevant, is of utmost concern to the Iranians, as should be obvious in Khamenei's remarks cited above.

Find Points of Agreement

In the run-up to the talks, Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki said they should begin on the basis of the "common points" in the proposals made by the two sides: the 5+1 proposal presented on June 14 by Solana, and Iran's earlier "Package for Constructive Negotiations,"

sent out on May 13. In other words, instead of rejecting the proposal because it contained demands unacceptable to Iran, the Iranian leadership decided to pursue a different method, putting unacceptable demands on the back burner for the moment, and focussing on what the two had in common.

The common points are many. Although they have not been given the in-depth analysis they deserve in the international press, at least Russia has taken note. Nicholas Patrochev, the new Secretary of the Russian Security Council, in a phone discussions with his Iranian counterpart Jalili on July 7, said Russia supported the concept that talks should be resumed on the basis of the common points.

Mottaki had stated in his letter accompanying Iran's May 13 proposal, that Iran was "ready to negotiate with the 5+1 Group within a specific framework on issues of mutual interest." The proposal itself stressed that "The main outcome of this new round of negotiations would be agreement on 'collective commitments' to cooperate on economic, political, regional, international, nuclear and energy security issues." All these areas are covered by the 5+1 proposal.

In its detailed points, the Iranian proposal stressed the need to pursue "a just peace and democracy in the region" in the context of "Respect for the rights of nations and their national interests; Support for the national sovereignty of states based on democratic methods." Iran also expressed its readiness to cooperate on bolstering stability in various parts of the world, including the Middle East, where it would contribute to a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The 5+1 proposal seems to take this into consideration, when it says it would "Support Iran in playing an important and constructive role in international affairs." The 5+1 Group also gives a nod to respect for national sovereignty, by stating, "Reaffirmation of the obligation under the U.N. charter to refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity of [sic] political independence of any state or in any other manner inconsistent with the Charter of the United Nations." This seems to mark a bit of an improvement over the 2006 document by the same group, which reportedly "guaranteed" Iran that no power in Europe would attack it with nuclear weapons (that is, France or Britain), but made no mention of the U.S. or Israel; nor did it guarantee that conventional attacks would be excluded.

This clause leads to another of Iran's major concerns, i.e. establishing regional security. The entire thrust of Tehran's document, is that national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence must be guaranteed, which means, threats of military aggression or regime change must be trashed from the agenda. The 5+1 document lists "Support for a conference on regional security issues" under its political measures. This is interesting. Iran has been organizing for a regional security arrangement, in talks with its neighbors, for the past eight years at least, and has made some headway with Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq and Turkey. Iran's view is that regional security can only be guaranteed through cooperation among its constituent nations, emphatically without the presence of foreign troops, no matter from where.

This obviously flies in the face of U.S.-U.K. plans to maintain their military presence in the region. The ongoing tug-of-war between the Nouri al-Maliki government in Iraq and the U.S., regarding a Status of Forces Agreement, provides a good reflection of Iranian views on the matter. All Iran-allied forces in Iraq reject the U.S. proposal for long-term presence. Not only has al-Maliki demanded a timetable for withdrawal of foreign troops, but his Iraqi National Security Advisor Muwafaq al-Rubaie has also said occupation must end. As quoted by

Xinhua on July 9, al-Rubaie stated, "We will not sign any memorandum of understanding without specifying a date for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq." Significantly, he made the statements from the holy city of Najaf, just after he had concluded consultations with the supreme authority for Shi'ites, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Al-Sistani has reiterated that any agreement on military forces with the occupying powers must be subjected to a referendum. Since then, the U.S. has been forced to pay lip service to agreement on reduction, if not withdrawal, of forces. On July 18, after Bush and al-Maliki had conferred on the matter, the White House made an announcement in language straddling a fine line between Orwellian Newspeak and Bushspeak, to the effect that somehow some agreement had been made. "The president and the prime minister agreed," it said, "that improving conditions should allow for the agreements now under negotiation to include a general time horizon for meeting aspirational goals — such as the resumption of Iraqi security control in their cities and provinces and the further reduction of U.S. combat forces from Iraq."(1)

Iran's document also calls for discussions on cooperation on trade and investment, something that is echoed in the 5+1 paper, which calls for "normalization of trade and economic relations." The central issue, of course, is the nuclear program. Here, there are also several areas of tangential convergence, though not agreement. Iran speaks of "Establishing enrichment and nuclear fuel production consortiums in different parts of the world — including Iran" and of "Cooperation to access and utilize peaceful nuclear technology and facilitating its usage by all states." The 5+1 document does not grant Iran the right to such a consortium on its territory, but speaks of "Provision of legally binding nuclear fuel supply guarantees" as well as "Cooperation with regard to management of spent fuel and radioactive waste." Sorting out the differences is the task of negotiations.

What is useful in the 5+1 paper is the "Support for construction of LWR (Light water reactor) based on state-of-the-art technology" as well as "Provision of technological and financial assistance necessary for Iran's peaceful use of nuclear energy, support for the resumption of technical cooperation projects in Iran by the IAEA." Also useful, and in agreement with Iran's approach, is the reference to "realizing the objective of a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction," which would have implications for Israel, the one nuclear power in the region.

If one were to proceed rationally in open-ended talks, several options might be available. To accommodate Iran's requirements for guaranteed nuclear fuel supplies, preferably through the establishment of international consortia for enrichment facilities in Iran and elsewhere, the proposals by Thomas Pickering, the MIT group, the International Crisis Group, and others could be relevant. For Iran to agree to suspend its enrichment program, a proposition which is seen by most Iranians as highly unlikely, the other side would have to go a very, very long way. It would have to provide air-tight guarantees not only for secure fuel supplies, but also for the security of Iran, the inviolability of its borders, respect for its independence and unlimited sovereignty. Such guarantees cannot be made on paper, but would have to be forged through political agreements amounting to endorsement of a regional security arrangement hammered out by the powers in the region, without outside interference. This may seem unthinkable at the moment, but, if the trend towards sovereignty underway in Iraq is allowed to continue, and if certain Arab nations in the Persian Gulf were to free themselves of their paranoia regarding Iran, the currently unthinkable might become an agenda item tomorrow.

Obviously, the success of talks with Iran depends on the position of the U.S. government. If

Washington, under new leadership, were to agree to normalizing relations with Iran, anything would be possible.

War Party in a Bind

The war party in London and Washington has not given up its plans for destabilizing or attacking Iran, before the Bush-Cheney mandate ends. More killings inside Iran were reported in late June-early July, substantiating Seymour Hersh's revelations of an active operation afoot by U.S. intelligence groups, to promote ethnic minorities in assassination operations against Iranian officials. At the same time, the anti-Iranian terrorist gang MKO had been reactivated, with a mass demonstration called near Paris weeks ago. The umbrella group of the MKO, run by Maryam Rajavi, called for all European governments to follow the lead of the British House of Lords, who voted to take the MKO off the list of terrorist organizations. The al-Maliki government in Iraq has promised it would expel the MKO, as requested by Iran, but the occupying powers have held up implementation thus far. Not only: in the first week of July, the MKO held a conference of anti-Iran groups, at its Iraqi headquarters in Camp Ashraf.

In addition to covert ops, there has been a good deal of traditional sabre-rattling, as reported extensively by this website, among others. Not only did Israel hold massive manoeuvres last month, characterized as preparations for a strike against Iran, but the U.S. and U.K. also held exercises in the Persian Gulf. Iran's much-publicized defensive manoeuvres, including the test firing of medium-range missiles, constituted a logical response, one which could have been expected by anyone who knows how the Iranians think.

Most intriguing, and politically decisive, in this picture, is the question, what does Moscow, under President Medvedev, think of this entire complex? There have been a couple of interesting signals in this respect. First, following the disgusting fiasco of the G-8 meeting in Japan, Secretary of State Condi Rice sped off to Prague to sign an agreement with the Czechs on deployment of the radars meant supposedly to track Iranian missiles. The Russian response had a new quality. A Foreign Ministry statement issued on July 9, said, "We will be forced to react not with diplomatic, but with military-technical methods." At the same time, there were discussions between Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Putin called Ahmadinejad on July 7 to express his "hope that negotiations about nuclear issue will continue and will yield clear results which would guarantee the full rights of the Islamic Republic of Iran," PressTV reported the next day. ITAR-TASS added that the two had discussed "bilateral cooperation in the field of transport and military-technical cooperation." The nuclear plant which Russia has completed at Bushehr, it has been confirmed, will start operating this year. And, on July 15, RIA Novosti reported that Gazprom and the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) signed a memorandum of cooperation in oil and gas production and transportation. The deal foresees development of oil and gas fields, building processing facilities, and transporting oil from the Caspian to the Gulf of Oman. Finally, on July 23, Reuters reported that Iran was to receive "an advanced Russian-made anti-aircraft system by year-end that could help fend off any preemptive strikes against its nuclear facilities," according to "senior Israeli defence sources.

Russia is actively opposing the war party's moves to target Iran as well as the Russian Federation itself. At the same time, Moscow is urging Iran to come to an agreement with the 5+1, and is offering substantial economic and political support in the process. Unless

something horrendous occurs in the meantime, it can be expected that Iran will announce agreement with the freeze-for-freeze proposal made in Geneva, within the two-week timeframe established. Prof. Hadian-Jazy, a political scientist from the University of Tehran, who publicly detailed Iran's terms for such a freeze option at a Berlin conference recently, told this author on July 23, that he also thought Tehran would announce agreement after two weeks.

Those who complain that the Iranians could have said as much in Geneva, without all the fancy footwork, demonstrate their utter lack of understanding of how people in the Islamic Republic think. It has taken almost 30 years for certain forces in the West (eg. current officials in the Bush-Cheney administration) to come to terms with the new reality in the region. Iran's current leaders have not been making outrageous demands. They have insisted only that they be treated as equals in any negotiating process, that they be respected for their civilization stretching back millenia, that their sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence be acknowledged in fact as well as words. Now that this reality seems to have penetrated some of the less hardened blockheads in Washington, the Iranians may be ready to do business. All to the benefit of world peace.

1. The White House statement is eloquent in its ambiguity: "improving conditions {should} allow for" this and that, but may in fact not; a "general time horizon" is somewhere between now and eternity; "aspirational goals" are presumably things the Iraqi government hopes for, but who knows whether they will ever come true; "aspirational goals — such as the resumption of Iraqi security control...": "such as" means, "for example," but is not binding; "the further reduction of U.S. combat forces from Iraq" is a far cry from withdrawal of all troops, which is what the Iraqis want. In short, the text commits the U.S. to nothing. The Iraqis will, therefore, not accept this as a solution.

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