

Biden promises Iran talks, toughness

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US Vice President Joe Biden says Washington will move toward direct talks with Iran but at the same time warns of a continued tough line.

In a Saturday speech on his first foreign trip since taking office, Biden attempted to draw a line between the policies of the new US administration and certain confrontational aspects of the Bush administration's foreign policy.

"Our administration does not believe in a clash of civilizations. There is nothing inevitable about that," said Biden at the Munich Security Conference.

The newly-installed US vice president added that Washington would try to "act preventively and not preemptively" to avoid having to make a choice between "the last resort" — which is going to war with Iran — and "the dangers of inaction."

"Iran has acted in ways that are not conducive to peace in the region or to the prosperity of its people; its illicit nuclear program is but one of those manifestations," Biden said.

"Our administration is reviewing policy toward Iran, but this much is clear; we will be willing to talk ... and to offer a very clear choice; continue down your current course and there will be pressure and isolation; abandon the illicit nuclear program and your support for terrorism and there will be meaningful incentives."

British Foreign Secretary David Miliband later urged Iran to seize the opportunity of having better relations with the United States, saying conditions could not get any better.

"It is not going to get any better than this. It's not going to get better than an American administration saying we want normal relations with Iran," Miliband said in Munich.

The United States accuses Iran of pursuing a military nuclear program, saying that the country has enough enriched material for a bomb.

The UN nuclear watchdog, however, has confirmed in its November and latest report that Iran has only managed to enrich uranium-235 to a level "less than 5 percent" — a rate consistent with the development of a nuclear power plant.

Nuclear arms production requires an enrichment level of above 90 percent.

Western powers have offered Iran political and economic incentives to convince the country to halt its uranium enrichment program.

This is while the nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) — to which Tehran is a signatory —

grants Iran the right to enrich uranium for civilian purposes.

Biden's remarks were an outline of President Barack Obama's foreign policy regarding Iran. It is widely believed that the new US president aims to soften the Bush administration's line against Iran.

President Obama told the Arabic-language television station Al Arabiya in January that, "if countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist, they will find an extended hand from us."

However, unnamed US presidential aides said on Tuesday that Obama may also seek to toughen sanctions on Tehran over its enrichment program.

Dennis Ross, a longtime Middle East expert expected to fill a senior post handling Iran, has long advocated increasing the pressure against Tehran.

A September report by a Bipartisan Policy Center task force including Ross warned that "the Europeans make war more likely if they do not strengthen sanctions against Iran and effectively end all commercial relations."

In what appeared to be in line with the political tip offered to US allies, German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned Iran on Saturday that diplomacy over its nuclear case could not drag on as it has for several years.

"We need to be ready for tougher sanctions," she said. "It is a must to stop Iran having nuclear weapons."

Other European countries including Britain and France have also signaled openness to additional sanctions against Iran, viewing them as a diplomatic lever that could lead to direct talks between the United States and Iran.

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