

International Talks Stall on Iran's Nuclear Program - France Blocks Agreement

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Talks in Geneva between Iran and the P5+1 group (the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany) broke up in the early hours of Sunday morning without reaching an interim agreement to end the protracted confrontation over Tehran's nuclear programs. The scheduled two-day talks had been extended to Saturday and the P5+1 foreign ministers flew into Geneva in anticipation that a deal would be reached, but France effectively blocked an agreement.

All along, the US and its European allies have demanded that Iran freeze much of its nuclear program, alleging that Tehran is seeking to build nuclear weapons. While details of the negotiations have not been made public, Iran reportedly was prepared to halt the enrichment of uranium to the 20 percent level, not use more sophisticated IR-2 gas centrifuges for uranium enrichment and not activate its heavy water reactor at Arak. Tehran has repeatedly denied any plans to construct a nuclear weapon.

In return, Iranian negotiators were seeking relief from the US-led sanctions that have crippled the country's economy—halving oil exports and sending inflation and unemployment soaring. The Obama administration refused to ease the most punitive measures—on Iran's oil and banking sectors—but offered to allow Tehran access to its oil earnings frozen in foreign accounts, and to trade in precious metals, petrochemicals and car parts.

The Israeli government condemned the proposed agreement, insisting that Iran must end all enrichment and dismantle its nuclear facilities before sanctions are lifted. According to the *Guardian*, US President Obama spoke with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Friday evening in an effort to persuade him not to oppose a deal. But Netanyahu continued to lobby against the agreement, ringing British Prime Minister David Cameron, Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande.

France reportedly stymied the agreement. Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius told a radio station that Paris would not accept "a fool's game." Breaching an arrangement not to publicly discuss details of the talks, Fabius mooted tough new measures—that Iran ship its 20 percent enriched uranium out of the country and halt construction on the Arak reactor—that he knew were unacceptable to Iran. Commenting on France's decision to break ranks, one Western diplomat told the *Guardian*: "This is about France's interests in the Gulf and the fact that Hollande is going to Israel later this month and doesn't want the trip to turn into a nightmare."

The tensions within the P5+1 grouping underline the fact that, behind the talks on the nuclear issue, all the major powers have economic and strategic interests at stake. Explaining why the Russian foreign minister had flown to Geneva, his deputy Sergei Ryabkov said: "There are many issues affecting the deep-seated interests of several countries." No power wants to be left behind if a deal is reached with Tehran.

Moreover, a US rapprochement with Iran, following more than three decades of unremitting hostility after the 1979 Iranian revolution overthrew the brutal US-aligned strongman, Shah Reza Pahlavi, would alter relations throughout the Middle East. American allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, both of which regard Iran as a regional rival, are fearful that their interests could suffer as a result. All the major powers, France included, are jostling for position in any new arrangement.

Further talks are scheduled in Geneva on November 20. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif put the best possible spin on the outcome, declaring: "Obviously the six countries may have differences of views, but we are working together and hopefully we will be able to reach an agreement when we meet again."

However, newly installed Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who has been pressing for a rapprochement with Washington, told the Iranian parliament yesterday that his government would not cave in to threats. "We have told our negotiating partners in words and in practice that the language of threats, sanctions, humiliation and discrimination would not work under any condition." He insisted that Iran's "red lines," including its right under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty to enrich uranium on Iranian soil, would not be crossed.

The Iranian press reacted angrily to news of France's opposition to the proposed deal, accusing Paris of siding with Israel. An editorial in the hardline *Keyhan* condemned "the disgraceful behaviour of the French foreign minister in the Geneva talks and his remarks on behalf of the Zionist regime." The newspaper is closely connected to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has given qualified approval for Rouhani to proceed with negotiations.

Speaking yesterday to NBC's "Meet the Press" from Geneva, US Secretary of State Kerry dismissed suggestions of any breach with France. "I'd say a number of nations—not just the French, but ourselves and others—wanted to make sure that we had the tough language necessary ... and not granting more or doing something sloppily that could wind up with a mistake," he said.

Kerry also sought to reassure Israel and opponents of the agreement in the US Congress, saying: "We are absolutely determined that this should be a good deal, or there'll be no deal ... We didn't close the deal here in the last couple of days, because we are together, unified, pushing for things that we believe provide the guarantees that Israel and the rest of the world demand here."

Following the talks, the top US negotiator Wendy Sherman flew to Israel to brief Netanyahu and his ministers and is likely to receive a chilly reception. Speaking before a cabinet meeting yesterday, the Israeli prime minister declared that he would do everything in his power to prevent "a bad agreement"—one that allowed Iran to retain its existing nuclear facilities. In a radio interview yesterday, economic minister Naftali Bennett revealed that he has called on Jewish organisations in the US and other countries to lobby against the deal before the Geneva talks resume next week.

Despite the Obama administration's appeal to Congress to hold off on further sanctions, Senate foreign relations committee chairman Robert Menendez indicated yesterday that the Senate would "move forward" on legislation that has already passed the House. Steps toward harsh new sanctions, which would effectively block all Iranian oil exports by 2015, in the midst of the Geneva negotiations, have the potential to undermine any agreement.

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