

Iran Nuclear Talks Extended

By [Keith Jones](#)

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Negotiators for Iran and the so-called P-6 powers—the US, the four other permanent United Nations Security Council members and Germany—announced Monday that they have agreed to extend the deadline to reach a comprehensive agreement to “normalize” Iran’s civilian nuclear program by seven months. The new deadline is July 1, 2015, with a March 1 deadline for the framework of a final agreement and an additional four months to resolve all technical details.

Yesterday’s announcement came just hours before the planned expiration of the interim agreement under which the “final status” negotiations have been proceeding.

The US and its Western allies have long accused Iran of seeking to develop nuclear weapons, charges Tehran has denied.

The nuclear charges against Iran were first made by the Bush administration in the immediate aftermath of Washington’s illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq. They have served as a pretext for the US to intensify its decades-long drive to compel Iran to forgo any challenge to US domination of the Middle East, the world’s most important oil-exporting region.

In 2012, the US and its European Union allies ratcheted up their sanctions on Iran, halving its oil exports and hobbling its overall trade by sequestering its overseas bank holdings and effectively freezing it out of the world banking system. These sanctions remain in force.

Under yesterday’s extension, as in the two previous interim agreements stretching back to last January, Iran will be allowed to repatriate about \$700 million of its overseas assets per month. This is only a fraction of the almost \$100 billion worth of Iranian assets—unremitted oil sale proceeds and Iranian central bank foreign currency reserves—currently frozen in the world banking system.

Under the new interim agreement, Tehran will continue to limit its enrichment of uranium to under 5 percent, delay activation of a plutonium reactor, and submit its nuclear facilities to an unprecedentedly intrusive IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) inspection regime.

At a press conference Monday, US Secretary of State John Kerry boasted that the US-led sanctions have forced Iran to either dismantle or freeze much of its nuclear program. “Today,” said Kerry, “Iran has no 20 percent enriched uranium. Zero. None. They have diluted and converted every ounce that they have... Today, IAEA inspectors have daily access to Iran’s enrichment activities and a far deeper understanding of Iran’s program.”

Kerry added that the extension did not mean the negotiations might not still fail.

Washington and its allies will review their options, said Kerry, if the March 1 deadline to agree on the framework of a comprehensive settlement is not met. "These talks," said the US Secretary of State, "are not going to get easier just because we extend them. They are tough, they've been tough, and they are going to stay tough."

The failure to secure a final agreement is a blow to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his government. Rouhani sharply criticized his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, accusing him of needlessly exacerbating relations with Washington. He won the June 2013 presidential election largely on the basis of his claim that he could rapidly reach an accommodation with the US and its European Union allies under which the sanctions would be removed and Iran's sovereign right to a full-cycle civilian nuclear program respected.

With the aim of wooing the US and its EU partners, Rouhani solicited the International Monetary Fund's advice on slashing social spending, traveled to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland to declare Iran "open for business," offered European energy companies privileged access to the country's vast energy reserves, and repeatedly declared that Tehran would be willing to assist the US in stabilizing the region if Washington abandoned the sanctions and its efforts to bring about regime change in Tehran.

Iran's Supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has strongly supported Rouhani's efforts. In the name of "national unity," he has repeatedly instructed Rouhani's opponents within the clerical political establishment and the Revolutionary Guards' high command to temper their criticisms of the government, particularly over the nuclear talks.

At the same time, Khamenei has frequently expressed skepticism about the outcome of the negotiations and urged that no effort be spared in the development of a "resistance economy."

In a nationally televised address Monday evening, Rouhani sought to present the negotiations as a diplomatic triumph, going so far as to claim that a deal on Iranian terms was imminent. "This way of negotiation will reach a final settlement," declared Rouhani. "Most of the gaps have been removed."

Omitting any mention of Washington's vow to retain sanctions against Iran for years to come so as to ensure its compliance with any final nuclear deal, Rouhani told the Iranian people that the P-6 "have reached the conclusion that pressure and sanctions on Iran will not bear fruit."

While the P-6 is comprised of the world's great powers with the exception of Japan, it is Washington, backed by the three EU powers, that holds the whip hand. As the negotiations came down to the wire last week, the US again made clear that any agreement with Tehran will be on its terms.

According to press reports, the US is adamant that Iran drastically curtail its civilian nuclear program, including eliminating more than three-quarters of its centrifuges.

Even more importantly, from Tehran's perspective, Washington is determined to continue to subject Iran to crippling economic sanctions, with relief doled out incrementally and over a period of years. Moreover, during a lengthy initial period, the Western powers want only piecemeal suspension of the sanctions, not their repeal, so that they can be quickly reinstituted should they determine that Tehran has failed to fulfill its commitments.

Only after a prolonged period—in off-the-record briefings, US officials have spoken in terms of fifteen or twenty years—would the special constraints on Iran’s civilian nuclear program be fully removed.

In the run-up to Monday’s deadline, US officials repeatedly said they were not interested in another extension. This, not surprisingly, proved to be a bluff.

As Kerry’s remarks cited above indicate, the Obama administration and much of the US military-security establishment believe they have extorted significant concessions from Tehran and calculate that more can be won by continuing to cripple Iran’s economy while holding the threat of military action in reserve.

This faction also believes that under conditions where Washington’s strategy in the Middle East has been thrown into crisis by the failure to date of the US regime-change proxy war in Syria and the ISIS incursion into Iraq, Washington should continue to explore the possibility of enlisting Tehran in its efforts to shore up US hegemony over the Middle East.

There is already at least a tacit understanding between Washington and Tehran in respect to Iraq, with both providing military support to the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad and the Kurdish Peshmerga in northern Iraq. Tehran has also indicated its support for the new US-reconfigured regime in Afghanistan.

In a television interview Sunday, US President Barack Obama said “significant” differences with Iran over the nuclear issue remained. At the same time, he signaled that if the Islamic Republic’s ruling elite were to align with Washington, a US-Iranian rapprochement could be readily realized.

The possibility of such a strategic realignment, in which Iran, as in the days of the Shah, becomes a key pillar of US interests in the Middle East, has unnerved both the Israeli elite and the Saudi royal family. For the past fourteen months, they have both been doing their best to derail any nuclear deal.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday welcomed the failure to reach a final agreement, repeating his oft-stated demand that Iran’s entire civilian nuclear program be dismantled as the condition for any relaxation of sanctions. In an interview with the BBC, Netanyahu made a scarcely veiled appeal for the US Congress to scuttle the negotiations by imposing still harsher sanctions on Iran. “The fact,” said Netanyahu, “that there is no deal now gives” the US and its EU partners “the opportunity” to impose additional sanctions. That is “the route that needs to be taken.”

In his BBC interview, Netanyahu also reiterated Israel’s threat to strike Iran militarily, saying, “Israel, always—always—reserves the right to defend itself.”

The Obama administration, not without difficulty, has thus far been able to prevent the Senate from adopting legislation previously adopted by the House that would dramatically increase the sanctions’ bite, including by seeking to eliminate all Iranian oil exports.

On Monday, Republican Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham and Kelly Ayotte issued a statement saying the continuation of negotiations with Iran should be coupled with further sanctions. Shortly afterwards, Democratic Senator Robert Menendez, the outgoing chairman of the Senator Foreign Relations Committee, announced that he was eager to work in a “bipartisan” fashion to pass a new sanctions bill.

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Articles by: [Keith Jones](#)

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