

Iran's Nuclear Program: Political Interlopers Step in to Scuttle Peace with Iran

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One of the most important reasons why hostility between Iran and outside powers over its nuclear program has never been conclusively settled is the fact that for far too many actors, it is not at all in their strategic interest. And now that an interim agreement with Iran is perhaps more tangible than ever before, a whole host of parties are coming out of the woodwork and voicing their dismay at the prospect of peace. Last weekend, negotiations in Geneva between Iran and the U.S., UK, France, Germany, Russia, and China ran down the clock without any substantial agreement between the parties. According to subsequent reports, it was France that had blocked a last-minute deal. However, a litany of groups, both inside and outside the negotiating room, will ultimately stand against the inking of any agreement with the beleaguered Iranian nation.

The general outline of the deal being negotiated is that in return for Iran temporarily ceasing sections of its nuclear program and consenting to more rigorous inspections, the international sanctions regime leveled against the country would be slowly rolled back and it would be allowed access to a portion of its frozen funds.

Apparently oblivious to the ongoing state of negotiations, the U.S. Congress has threatened to put in place a new set of sanctions that would further tighten the noose around the country's neck. The Senate Banking Committee is considering letting these new sanctions move forward, a strategy which would prove extremely detrimental to the negotiations. As the State Department spokeswoman has said, "The American people justifiably and understandably prefer a peaceful solution ... So as this legislation is being considered, members of Congress need to ask themselves: Do they believe diplomacy should be the first resort, or should we open the door to confrontation?" [1] Although the negotiating countries have said they will not roll back sanctions during this preliminary agreement, [2] instituting new sanctions now would effectively neuter the ongoing negotiations.

Secretary of State Kerry has pointed out that new sanctions "could be viewed as bad faith by the people we're negotiating with, it could destroy the ability to be able to get agreement, and it could actually wind up setting us back in a dialogue that's taken 30 years to be able to achieve." [3] As one commentator has wisely noted, "At a time when Congressional ineptitude is at an all-time high, I'd like to see as little Congressional influence over the highest echelons of U.S. national security policy as possible." [4] Still, Congressional leaders such as Eric Cantor have gone as far as insisting that, "a Geneva deal would fall short if it did not entirely halt Iran's nuclear program." [2] Unrealistic or even harmful beliefs on the part of Congress could end up being the biggest obstacle at this historic juncture.

The immediate butcher of the deal was reportedly France and her foreign minister, Laurent

Fabius. Looking at previous instances, it becomes clear that France's foreign policy vis-à-vis Iran "is often defined in opposition to that of Washington." [5] However, Secretary of State Kerry attempted to pin the blame on Iran, later saying that, "The French signed off on it, we signed off on it. There was unity but Iran couldn't take it." [6] A war of words ensued, when Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif then said in a series of tweets, "Mr. Secretary, was it Iran that gutted over half of U.S. draft Thursday night? And publicly commented against it Friday morning? No amount of spinning can change what happened within 5+1 in Geneva. But it can further erode confidence." [7] Whatever the case may be, France potentially represents another actor that could recklessly derail future negotiations, being that the country is now recognized by many as "the most hawkish Western nation on matters involving the Middle East and neighbouring areas." [8] Following the breakdown of negotiations in Geneva, Senator John McCain even tweeted "Vive la France."

Israel has undoubtedly been the most vocal of those that fancy themselves conscientious objectors to a deal with Iran. This is not at all surprising, given the historical enmity between it and the Islamic Republic. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has argued to Kerry and other participating European foreign ministers that Iran would be making off with the "deal of the century" [2] if even these paltry negotiations are successful. The possibility of an agreement between Iran and the West would come at enormous financial and geopolitical costs to Israel, so naturally it would prefer to see the continuation of hostilities.

In the words of one analyst, "If you're an Israel who's built your national defense strategy on having this large external threat and positioned yourself in a way that brings the American industrial base and their military prowess to come boost your own limited capabilities, you need that Iranian threat there." [9] Netanyahu has stepped up his demagoguery, warning that the U.S. would eventually be a nuclear target as well. "Coming to a theater near you — you want that?" he asked a crowd of American Jewish leaders. "Well, do something about that!" [10] Regional states that identify as ideological or strategic rivals of Iran also have a stake in the failure of negotiations — Saudi Arabia chief among them. These Sunni Arab states would ideally like to see the current Iranian regime's destruction. In the eyes of the Saudis, "You have their historical competitor in the region coming to some sort of deal or negotiation with the United States, and Saudi Arabia has built its post-Cold War identity as being that partner to the United States in the region." [9] "Tehran remains the sole serious external threat on the horizon," to Riyadh, "particularly with the rise of the Shia." [5] Secretary Kerry has also met with leaders of the United Arab Emirates to allay their concerns that more power would be ceded to Iran during any agreement. [11]

Finally, despite Moscow's assertions to the contrary, Russia is having to walk a tightrope during the negotiations, between maintaining stability in the Middle East and preserving its own economic interests. "Besides leaving Russia on the margins, the Iran deal threatens to impact the global oil market, shaving perhaps \$10 from the oil price. This would deliver a severe blow to the petro-rent-dependent Russian economy." [12] Russia, if not working towards a deal which favors Iran, is likely to remain a passive observer in the negotiations and follow the lead of the United States.

In the interest of peace, it is now more crucial than ever that these parties temporarily put aside their reservations, lest they spoil a much-needed détente between Iran and the international community. Only then can an accord be clinched that is sound but also pragmatic. During the week ahead, it is in everyone's interest that cooler heads in Geneva prevail.

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Notes

- [1] "Daily Press Briefing – November 13, 2013." U.S. Department of State. The Office of Website Management, Bureau of Public Affairs, 13 Nov. 2013. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.
- [2] Charbonneau, Louis, and Yeganeh Torbati. "Iran Nuclear Deal Unlikely as Split Emerges in Western Camp: Diplomats." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, 09 Nov. 2013. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.
- [3] "US Congress Pulling the Strings on Iran Sanctions." YouTube. GlobalResearchTV, 14 Nov. 2013. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.
- [4] Panda, Ankit. "The Congressional Threat to an Iran Deal." The Diplomat. The Diplomat, 16 Nov. 2013. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.
- [5] Delpech, Thérèse. *Iran and the Bomb: The Abdication of International Responsibility*. Trans. Ros Schwartz. New York: Columbia UP, 2007. Print.
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- [7] Cowell, Alan. "Iranian Official Faults Kerry and France for Breakdown in Talks." The New York Times. The New York Times Company, 12 Nov. 2013. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.
- [8] "From Africa to the Middle East, France's New Hawkishness." NDTV. Agence France-Presse, 17 Nov. 2013. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.
- [9] "Conversation: The State of Negotiations With Iran." YouTube. STRATFORvideo, 15 Nov. 2013. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.
- [10] Gordon, Michael R., Mark Landler, and Jodi Rudoren. "Iran Balked at Language of Draft Nuclear Deal, Western Diplomats Say." The New York Times. The New York Times Company, 10 Nov. 2013. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.
- [11] Landler, Mark. "After Near Miss on Iran, Kerry Says Diplomacy Is Still the Right Path." The New York Times. The New York Times Company, 11 Nov. 2013. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.
- [12] Baev, Pavel K. "Iran's New Flexibility Exposes Russia's Arrogance and Irrelevance." The Jamestown Foundation. The Jamestown Foundation, 11 Nov. 2013. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.

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