

US intensifies confrontation with Iran

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Negotiations next week in Baghdad between Iran and the P5+1—the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany—will be a turning point in the dangerous confrontation over Iranian nuclear programs. Washington is putting intense pressure on Tehran to make major concessions, even as the US prepares to impose crippling sanctions and threatens war.

Speaking last week in Vienna, US nuclear negotiator Robert Wood demanded that Iran take “urgent, practical steps” in order to comply “with all its international obligations.” He criticised Iran for failing to grant “the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] access to all relevant sites, documents and persons necessary to resolve questions about its nuclear program.”

Iran has repeatedly declared that it has no intention of building nuclear weapons. Its nuclear facilities, including its Natanz and Fordo enrichment plants, and stockpiles are under IAEA inspection and monitoring as required by the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). However, the US and its allies are insisting that Iran end uranium enrichment, which is permitted under the NPT, and ship its stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium out of the country.

The likelihood of any firm deal emerging from the Baghdad talks is slim. The US demands that the IAEA be granted access to personnel and facilities is an endless process requiring Iran to prove a negative—that nowhere in its large territory are there programs related to nuclear weapons. The IAEA, which is meeting with Iranian officials this week, is demanding admission to Iran’s Parchin complex—a military base—where allegedly high-explosive testing of the type required for a nuclear device took place, nearly a decade ago. Like similar claims, the IAEA “evidence” comes from foreign intelligence sources—most likely from the US or Israel.

Israel, which is threatening to take unprovoked military action against Iran, has put more pressure on

negotiations by pressing for a complete end to Iran’s uranium enrichment programs. According to the Associated Press, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told EU policy chief Catherine Ashton last week that Iran would have to commit to a timetable to end enrichment and to dismantle its Fordo plant for Israel to accept the outcome—demands that Tehran has already rejected.

Ashton was in Israel to ascertain the stance of the newly formed coalition that brought the opposition Kadima party into the government. Kadima leader Shaul Mofaz, a former internal security chief, had been critical of Netanyahu’s threats to attack Iran. But his entry into the cabinet makes an Israeli attack on Iran more, rather than less, likely. The coalition gives the government an overwhelming parliamentary majority, and Mofaz’s presence will be used to blunt widespread domestic opposition to a war on Iran.

Israel’s Channel 10 News last Thursday reported that US officials were engaged in marathon talks over concern that the way was now clear for Israeli air strikes on Iran. Netanyahu forged the coalition with Mofaz after a surprise late night deal that averted an early election which was considered an obstacle to an attack. At a joint press conference, the two men declared that they saw eye-to-eye on a range of issues, including Iran.

The differences between the US and Israel are tactical. Whereas Netanyahu has been dismissive of talks and sanctions, the Obama administration is seeking to weaken and undermine the regime in Tehran prior to any attack. Iran is desperate to avoid the imposition of US and European sanctions that amount to a virtual blockade on its oil exports—itsself an act of economic war—and are due to take effect at the end of June.

Over the past fortnight, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has been putting pressure on both India and China to wind back their imports of Iranian oil. The US

sanctions will unilaterally penalise foreign banks and corporations that conduct business with Iran's central bank, unless President Obama issues a waiver. This selective imposition of penalties makes clear that the US is exploiting the confrontation with Iran to undermine the position of its rivals, especially China.

The Obama administration's preparations are not limited to economic sanctions. Since the beginning of the year, the US Navy has increased the number of aircraft carrier battle groups in or near the Persian Gulf to two. Earlier this month, unnamed US officials confirmed that the Pentagon has dispatched its most sophisticated warplanes—the F-22 Raptor—to the Al-Dhafra air base in the United Arab Emirates. The build-up provides the US military with the ability to launch massive air strikes against Iran's military and nuclear installations.

Washington has also been engaged in strengthening the military capacity of the autocratic monarchical regimes that are its allies in the Gulf. In its latest move, the Obama administration announced on Friday that it would resume military sales to Bahrain, despite the violent suppression of protests in the Gulf state. According to the *Washington Post*, the equipment would include warships, air-to-air and ground-to-air missile systems and engine upgrades for its F-16 fighters. Bahrain hosts the US Navy's Fifth Fleet.

The escalating US confrontation with Tehran is not primarily over Iran's nuclear programs. Rather the preparations for a new war of aggression are being driven by the historic decline of US imperialism and its determination to use its military superiority to assert its untrammelled dominance over the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. Having invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, the US is recklessly threatening another war that has the potential to engulf the region and trigger broader conflicts.

If the Baghdad talks next week collapse, the danger of military conflict initiated by Israel or the US will rise dramatically. Workers and young people in the United States and internationally must oppose this drive to war by the Obama administration. The only means for preventing war is the independent mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist strategy to put an end to the fundamental cause of war—the crisis-ridden profit system.

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