

US seeks to extend interim nuclear accord with Iran

By Keith Jones
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US President Barack Obama has indicated that he favors extending the six-month interim nuclear agreement the US, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China entered into with Iran at the beginning of the year.

Set to expire this Sunday, the interim agreement provided for a slight, reversible relaxation of the US-spearheaded economic sanctions that have crippled Iran's economy, in exchange for Tehran rolling back much of its civilian nuclear program.

"It is clear to me," Obama told reporters Wednesday, "we've made real progress in several areas, and that we have a credible way forward."

The US president claimed that further consultations were required with allies, congressional leaders and the Pentagon on "whether additional time" is necessary to reach a "final" agreement with Tehran over its nuclear program. But his remarks and those of other senior US officials, including Secretary of State John Kerry, indicate that a decision in principle to extend the interim agreement has already been made by all the parties, including the US, its European Union allies, and Iran.

Important and potentially highly contentious details remain to be worked out, however. These include the length of the extension and what, if any, additional sanction relief will be given Iran. The lion's share of the "relief" in the soon-to-expire six-month agreement consisted of allowing Tehran access to a small fraction of the tens of billions of dollars of its own money—foreign oil payments and central bank reserves—now frozen in the world banking system.

Obama's remarks on the Iran talks came after he and Vice President Joseph Biden conferred with Kerry at the White House. Kerry had spent the better part of the previous three days meeting in Vienna with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and other participants in the negotiations between Iran and the P-6—the five permanent UN Security Council members and Germany.

The Vienna talks, which began in early July, were aimed at concluding a final agreement on normalizing Iran's civilian nuclear program—a program to which Tehran, as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, has a legal right. However, on Wednesday, if not before, the talks transitioned into a negotiation on extending the interim agreement.

Although that agreement provides for an extension of up to six months by mutual agreement, Kerry and other Obama administration officials publicly insisted until this week that the US was not interested in extending it. Repeatedly, they issued stark warnings that the time for Tehran to take "hard decisions"—i.e., to bend to Washington's demands—had arrived, and insisted that only in the event of "significant progress" toward a final agreement could an extension be considered.

Iran did signal a significant shift toward accommodating US demands—the latest of many—at the beginning of this week. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Zarif indicated that Tehran would be willing to accept all the restrictions imposed on its nuclear program under the interim agreement for a further seven years.

This falls short of US demands. Washington has said that Iran's civilian nuclear program should be highly restricted and the target of a robust and intrusive international inspection regime for at least two decades. Moreover, the removal of the economic sanctions should take place over a decade or more and, even after that, the threat of their speedy reactivation should remain.

Nevertheless, the Obama administration was quick to acknowledge the Iranian concession.

No less important for Washington were the renewed signals from the Islamic Republic's bourgeois rulers that they are eager to help US imperialism extricate itself from the crisis produced by its aggression across the Middle East.

When Zarif first met with Kerry on Sunday, he hailed the agreement Kerry had just forged between the rival candidates to succeed Hamid Karzai as the head of Afghanistan's US-imposed government, calling it "extremely important" for the Afghan people.

Tehran has repeatedly pointed to the intelligence assistance it provided the US during the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and its support for Washington's installation of Karzai as the country's leader as proof that the Islamic Republic could be an ally of Washington in the broader Middle East.

While no details have been revealed, Zarif and Kerry are also known to have discussed their governments' respective efforts to stabilize Iraq's sectarian Shia government and army.

Kerry reportedly bluntly demanded that Iran not resupply Hamas with missiles or other weaponry expended or destroyed in the current Israeli military assault on the Hamas-governed Gaza strip.

According to the Associated Press, "Unlike in years past, where US-Iranian interaction appeared largely limited to the nuclear matter, the two countries' interests now crisscross at multiple levels, and their discussions are broader... With so much at stake, and the potential for US-Iranian co-operation in other areas being explored, neither side wants to terminate the nuclear talks."

For Washington, the unsubstantiated and to a large degree fabricated charges surrounding Iran's nuclear program have always been a pretext: a means of isolating, bullying and threatening Iran with the long-term strategic objective of forcing the Iranian bourgeoisie to forego any challenge to US hegemony and, ultimately, re-imposing on the Iranian people the type of neo-colonial subjugation that existed under the Shah's monarchical dictatorship.

The charge that Iran was developing nuclear weapons was first leveled by the Bush administration in 2003 shortly after US troops had occupied Baghdad and as Washington contemplated a war against Iran.

In respect to Iran, as in the broader pursuit of US imperialism's drive to shore up its global hegemony, Obama has followed on from Bush, leading America's EU allies in imposing one of the most sweeping sanction regimes ever seen outside of war and repeatedly threatening Iran with attack.

Obama's decision to seek an extension of the interim nuclear agreement is based on a series of predatory calculations and is part of an unrelenting US drive to strengthen its hold over the world's principal oil-exporting region—a drive that has already led to a

series of wars that have blown up whole countries and uprooted and killed millions.

The first of these is the conclusion that the sanctions have crippled Iran and, fearing social unrest, forced Tehran to seek a rapprochement with Washington.

The second is the assessment that there is a significant faction of the Iranian ruling elite—led by the current president, Hasan Rouhani, and his mentor, the former president, Hashemi Rafsanjani—that favors an accommodation with Washington on pragmatic grounds. These elements have demonstrated they are ready to submit to Washington's strategic agenda, including its drive to isolate China and Russia.

Thus, in a recent article entitled "US and Iran Security Cooperation Could Help Save Iraq," Seyed Hossien Mousavain, who is known to be close to Rouhani and to act as an intermediary for him with the US, wrote that "Iran welcomes" America's strategic shift to the Pacific and can assist it by helping the US "to secure and stabilize" the Middle East.

The third calculation is that, with US policy in the Middle East in crisis, Washington can benefit from tacit and ultimately open cooperation with Iran—certainly in Iraq and Afghanistan, and possibly in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and elsewhere. There is good reason to believe that such assistance would be forthcoming. In a secret 2003 offer to the US sanctioned by Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, Tehran offered to cut off military support to Hezbollah and Hamas and recognize the state of Israel.

Finally, the US believes that an agreement with Tehran, even if only short-lived, can give Washington time to sort out the contradictions in its foreign policy, such as using extreme Sunni Islamists as its principal agents in its regime-change war in Syria while suppressing them in Iraq. It can also enable Washington to continue to probe and exploit the conflicts within the Iranian regime over how to respond to US pressure and, above all, contend with growing popular opposition, as the last socio-economic reforms resulting from the 1979 revolution are eliminated.

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