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## US Hard Line in Failed Iran Talks Driven by Israel

By Gareth Porter

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Negotiations between Iran and the United States and other members of the P5+1 group in Baghdad ended in fundamental disagreement Thursday over the position of the P5+1 offering no relief from sanctions against Iran.

The two sides agreed to meet again in Moscow Jun. 18 and 19, but only after Iran had threatened not to schedule another meeting, because the P5+1 had originally failed to respond properly to its five-point plan.

The prospects for agreement are not likely to improve before that meeting, however, mainly because of an inflexible U.S. diplomatic posture that reflects President Barack Obama's need to bow to the demands of Israel and the U.S. Congress on Iran policy.

The U.S. hard line in the Baghdad talks and the failure to set the stage for an early agreement with Iran means that Iran will not only increase but accelerate its accumulation of 20-percent enriched uranium, which has been the ostensible reason for wanting to get Iran to the negotiating table quickly.

Iran's enrichment to 20 percent, which Tehran has justified over the past two years as needed by its Tehran Research Reactor to produce medical isotopes, can be turned into high enriched uranium more quickly than the 3.5 percent enriched uranium for Iran's nuclear power program.

But although Iran has let it be known that it is open to making a deal to end its 20 percent enrichment and even to let go of its stockpile if offered the right incentive, the Obama administration has opted not to go for such a deal by refusing to offer any corresponding reduction in sanctions.

The U.S. demand for the closure of the Fordow facility, which is now under surveillance by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), was a direct response to pressure from Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that demand one of his "benchmarks" for the talks on Mar. 2.

In discussions with the U.S. in late March, Defense Minister Ehud Barak insisted on the closure of Fordow as one of the Israeli demands, as he revealed Apr. 4. That was a quid pro quo for Israeli acceptance of a focus in the first stage on halting Iran's uranium enrichment to 20 percent rather than demanding an end to all uranium enrichment, as Reuters reported Apr. 4.

That agreement clearly implied that the Obama administration would do nothing to dismantle any sanctions against Iran unless Iran ended all uranium enrichment.

The administration's refusal to entertain any removal of sanctions as part of its diplomatic strategy with Iran also recognized the fact that it would have to pay a steep political price merely to request any change in sanctions legislation and would be unlikely to prevail over the deeply entrenched interests of Israel in both houses.

After being lobbied by 12,000 activists attending the conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in March, the House of Representatives passed a resolution demanding a policy of preventing Iran from having a "nuclear weapons capability" by a vote of 401-11.

The U.S. understandings with Israel were sharply at odds with a deal with Iran based on a "step by step" approach which had been proposed by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Under that approach, each move by Iran to satisfy Western concerns about its nuclear program should be rewarded by a relaxation of sanctions.

As Michael Adler revealed in The Daily Beast Mar. 7, however, the Obama administration was unwilling to reduce sanctions gradually as the Russians wanted. Adler's account implied that it could only come at the end of the process in response to a complete suspension of all uranium enrichment by Iran as a "confidence building measure".

For Iran, 20 percent enrichment has been largely an exercise in increasing its bargaining leverage with the United States by creating a level of enrichment that the U.S. has said is threatening.

Iran has made a series of policy statements since it began that enrichment suggesting that the objective has been to trade those bargaining chips for negotiating concessions that would benefit Iran – mainly moves to reduce sanctions and the recognition of its right to enrich.

The demand that the 20 percent enrichment be ended and that Fordow facility be closed without any easing of economic sanctions would represent a double diplomatic defeat which Iran has strenuously rejected.

"Giving up 20 percent enrichment levels in return for plane spare parts is a joke," Iranian analyst Hasan Abadini was quoted as saying.

There was some discussion before the Baghdad meeting, initiated by Europeans, of at least offering to suspend a European ban on insuring oil tankers, which threatens some of Iran's oil trade with Asian countries, in conjunction with a deal, according to the New York Times May 18. But that was evidently rejected by Washington.

The U.S. rejection of the "step by step" approach in favor of a stance that leans heavily toward Israeli preferences leads to apparent contradictions in U.S. policy.

That stance is sharply at odds with the official U.S. stance suggesting ending Iran's 20 percent enrichment is an urgent requirement. A senior U.S. official was quoted by Associated Press Thursday as saying, "We are urgent about this, because every day we don't figure this out, they keep going forward with a nuclear program."

The contradiction was further highlighted by reports that Iran is further increasing its capability for 20 percent enrichment at the Fordow facility. A Reuters story from Vienna Thursday said that Iran may have already put 350 more centrifuges into Fordow since February, on top of the almost 700 already operating there.

Associated Press reported a senior U.S. official in Baghdad explaining that sanctions were likely to increase the pressure on Iran to agree to U.S. terms in the next round of talks. "Maximum pressure is not yet being felt by Iran," the official was quoted as saying.

But few diplomatic observers believe that Iran's Supreme Leader, who makes the crucial decisions, could afford to bow to the U.S. demands as presented in Baghdad.

Meanwhile, the U.S. strategy of drawing out the talks to wait for the impact of sanctions to work on the Iranians allows Iran to continue adding "facts on the ground".

Ironically, U.S. strategists have argued publicly in the past that Iran was using negotiations to "play for time" while it increased its nuclear capabilities.

In another seeming contradiction between U.S. diplomatic posture and its declared interest in ensuring that Iran prove the non-military character of its nuclear program, U.S. officials dismissed as irrelevant the news that Iran and IAEA Director General Yukia Amano are close to an agreement on the terms of Iranian cooperation in clarifying allegations of past nuclear weapons work.

A "senior U.S. official" said the United States welcomed the signs of progress, but then carefully differentiated the purpose of the P5+1 negotiations and those of the IAEA, according to Al-monitor May 22.

"The IAEA is about accounting for the past and for naming what is," the official explained. "It is not about what is the nature of Iran's nuclear program and what will Iran's nuclear program look like going forward, and will it be peaceful."

That statement abruptly reversed previous U.S. insistence that Iran's cooperation with the IAEA represented a central element in a diplomatic settlement of the conflict over Iran's nuclear program

The idea that U.S. negotiations with Iran would not be affected by whatever it did to prove allegations of past nuclear weapons work wrong implies that Washington is firmly committed to its present diplomatic course mainly in order to placate Israel and the U.S. Congress.