

Iran wants a nuclear deal, not war

Nuclear negotiations with Iran, in the right spirit, will work. US-led trade embargos and military threats will bring only disaster



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The Guardian, Monday 21 January 2013



Benjamin Netanyahu warns the UN about Iran's nuclear ambitions last September, although 'Israel has not permitted the IAEA even a single inspection and possesses hundreds of nuclear weapons'. Photograph: Richard Drew/AP

To stop Iran achieving "critical capability" to produce nuclear weapons in the coming months, President Obama must impose "maximal" sanctions – that is the message of a new report issued in Washington by five senior non-proliferation specialists.

They call on Obama to implement a de facto international embargo on all investments in, and trade with, Iran, declaring: "A successful outcome in any negotiations with Iran depends on the immediate implementation of these sanctions, along with simultaneously reinforcing the credibility of President Obama's threat to use military force, if necessary, to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons."

Although the report is the work of The Project on US Middle East Nonproliferation Strategy – and is supposedly about nonproliferation – its authors have concentrated on

punitive measures against Iran, and none against Israel. However, Iran has been fairly compliant: it has ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and has given the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) more than 4,000 man-days' worth of inspections in recent years. According to the US National Intelligence Estimate's assessment in 2007 and 2011, Iran does not have an active nuclear-weapons programme.

There is no conclusive evidence that Iran has made any effort to build the bomb since 2003, and Iran's leadership has not yet made a political decision to do so. In contrast, Israel is not a signatory to the NPT, has not permitted the IAEA even a single inspection and possesses hundreds of nuclear weapons. The reasons that international efforts to realise a "nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East" have made no progress since Iran proposed the idea almost 40 years ago must therefore be clear.

Nevertheless, the report states that the US "should offer nuclear sanctions relief to Iran only in response to meaningful concessions by the Iranians that are consistent with the multiple relevant UN security council resolutions, IAEA board of governors resolutions, and US laws".

In order to develop a more realistic approach, we need to assess the status quo in nuclear negotiations between Iran, the P5+1 group (US, UK, France, Russia, China and Germany) and the IAEA, the UN watchdog. The latest round of talks in January between the watchdog and Iran have not resulted in a deal. The IAEA and the P5+1 have a number of major demands, including the implementation of the additional protocol to the non-proliferation treaty, which mandates greater access for inspectors; co-operation on issues related to the "possible military dimension" of Iran's nuclear activities; capping uranium enrichment at 5%; and exporting enriched uranium not consumed domestically.

The demands on capping and exporting go beyond the treaty, and even the additional protocol. More than 70 countries have not yet signed up to the protocol; and certain member states of the IAEA enrich uranium to 96%, with tonnes of uranium stockpiled beyond domestic needs. Moreover, the IAEA requires Iran to give access beyond that required by the additional protocol in order to address the "possible military dimension". Iran cannot accept such demands for free, and the IAEA is not in position to negotiate reciprocations. That is why it was a mistake to have the IAEA's visit to Tehran take place prior to the meeting between P5+1 and Iran.

Nevertheless, those familiar with the realities of nuclear negotiations know very well that Iran has both publicly and in private meetings with the P5+1 indicated its readiness to accept all the above major demands. In return Iran expects recognition of its legitimate right to enrichment under the NPT and the lifting of sanctions – but

unfortunately the western powers among the P5+1 have not signed up to such a deal.

The art of negotiation is to frame such a package with a specific timetable, and implemented by a step-by-step plan with appropriate reciprocations at each stage. It would be prudent for President Obama and the world powers to advance such a fair deal in upcoming talks and ignore attempts by warmongers to target advocates of a diplomatic solution.

Promoters of further sanctions, isolation and other punitive measures aim to make war with Iran inevitable. But such a war would make the US war in Iraq look like a walk in a park. Instead we should take the opportunity for diplomacy to prevail and devote the necessary political will to make it succeed.

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