



IRAN-UNITED STATES NEGOTIATIONS

On October 1, 2009, more than thirty years since diplomatic relations between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran were severed, representatives of Iran and the United States, along with representatives of China, France, Germany, Great Britain, and Russia (P5+1: the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) met for a day of negotiations focused on, but not limited to, Iran's nuclear program.

Expectations for the October 1 meeting were very low, particularly after it was reported by both Iran and the United States that Iran had been constructing a second uranium enrichment facility in a mountain near Qom. There has been considerable debate among experts whether Iran, by reporting the site to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) a week before the Geneva meeting, had met its legal requirements under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Iran and many experts maintain that Iran had met its legal requirement by reporting the facility more than six months before nuclear material would be introduced into it. Other experts and the director general of the IAEA, Dr. ElBaradei, have asserted that Iran should have reported to the IAEA when they began construction of the facility. Irrespective of legalities, waiting to report did not enhance the sense of transparency of the Iranian nuclear program.

The post-presidential-election turmoil and the obvious divisions among the ruling clerics and officials in Iran also raised the question whether the Iranian negotiators would be able to reach any agreements with the representatives of the P5+1 nations, further lowering expectations. Recent strong anti-Israel statements by President Ahmadinejad are not constructive and have increased the opposition in some quarters of the United States to negotiating with Iran.

Given the low level of expectations, the reported results of the meeting were significant. The meeting lasted seven hours and included a 45-minute meeting between the Iranian representative, Dr. Saeed Jalili, Secretary of Iran's National Security Council, and the US representative, Ambassador William J. Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs. They were reported to have discussed substantive matters beyond the nuclear issue including human rights. Firstly, Iran said that it would give the IAEA inspectors access to the Qom facility within weeks. (This was also implicit when Iran informed the IAEA of the facility.) It was also reported that Iran had agreed in principle to ship much of the low-enriched uranium (LEU) generated at its Natanz facility to Russia and France for further enrichment and fabrication into fuel rods for use in Iran's research reactor in Tehran that is used for producing medical isotopes.



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The implications of this agreement, if it holds, are very significant. First it removes much of Iran's LEU, meaning Iran would not have enough enriched uranium to produce a nuclear bomb if it wanted to. It also establishes the principle of enriching Iran's uranium outside of Iran, something Iran has resisted. Finally, it tacitly acknowledges Iran's right to produce enriched uranium. There was no evidence that the negotiations included an insistence by the United States that Iran stop its program of enriching uranium, under the supervision of the IAEA, to the five percent level needed to fuel a nuclear power plant. This is a red-line the United States has insisted on for years and which Iran has rejected as an infringement on its rights, as a signatory of the NPT, to fully develop nuclear energy technology for peaceful purposes.

While this one-day meeting was only a beginning, the results are hopeful, and the parties agreed to meet again later in October. It is unfortunate that the US Congress is now considering passing tougher sanctions legislation, thinking that this will support and strengthen the administration's hand in the negotiations and somehow also support the Iranian people's drive for more freedom and democracy in Iran following the controversial presidential election, the violent crackdown on peaceful demonstration, and the ongoing internal conflict over the election and its aftermath. Leaders of the opposition in Iran have explicitly spoken out against increased sanctions saying they would hurt the people and not the government. Moreover, when a Deputy Secretary of State was asked by a Senator in an October 6, 2009, hearing in Washington whether the administration had asked Congress to pass sanctions on Iran, he responded, "No we have not." Congress's approach undermines the attempt at engaging Iran diplomatically to resolve differences with the United States.

AFSC strongly affirms the beginning of direct negotiations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States. It is important that these negotiations be given time and effort to break through the thirty years without diplomatic relations. Trust and respect will need to be developed between the individuals at the negotiating table and between the larger governments, and this will take time and a commitment to the diplomatic process. Any effort to impose stricter economic sanctions during the negotiations will undermine and likely destroy the process. AFSC hopes these negotiations are the beginning of a process that will lead to normalization of diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States.