

U.S.-Iran Talks: The Road to Diplomatic Failure

[submitted to Le Monde Diplomatique]

Gareth Porter

The talks between the G5 plus 1 and Iran are careening toward a premature breakdown. If they do fall apart, it will be due in large part to a serious diplomatic miscalculation by the Obama administration.

Along with and its European allies, the Obama seized on a plan that cleverly asked Iran to divest itself of the bulk of its stock of low-enriched uranium (LEU). It seemed to represent a golden opportunity to set back Iran's nuclear program, and despite the warning signs that such an objective is not achievable by the West, it lured the West away from a serious effort to find a diplomatic compromise with Iran aimed at defusing the decades-long hostility between Washington and Tehran.

The origins of the immediate diplomatic drama surrounding the proposal lay in Iran's need to supply fuel for its U.S.-built Tehran research reactor producing medical radioisotopes. Iran had obtained 23 kilograms of fuel enriched to 20 percent from Argentina under a cooperation agreement signed in 1988 that ended in 1993. But that supply is expected to run out in late 2010, and Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki sent a letter to the IAEA in June requesting its help in purchasing enough 20 percent enriched uranium under the Agency's supervision so that medical reactor would again have a long-term supply.

But that would require a relaxation of the international sanctions against Iran's nuclear program. And when the Obama administration got wind of the Iranian request, it created a new

diplomatic strategy aimed at forcing Iran to accept terms that would give up most of its LEU for about a year. During a visit to Moscow in July, President Barack Obama's White House adviser on the Iranian nuclear issue, Gary Samore, reportedly approached Russian officials about a proposal that would require that Iran send its low enrich uranium to Russia to be converted into the more highly enriched fuel rods, thus setting the clock of Iran's already achieved breakout capability back for about a year.

That proposal was in line with the diplomatic objective that Samore had brought to the White House in January 2009. In a paper co-authored with Bruce Reidel of the Brookings Institution and published in December 2008, Samore had suggested that Iran's LEU should be exported to Russia to be converted into fuel rods for the Bushehr reactor in order take away Iran's nuclear break-out capability.

Then just one week after Iran had agreed to participate in talks with the Group of 5 plus 1, Tehran informed the IAEA that it was constructing a second uranium enrichment facility near Qom. The United States, Britain and France denounced the existence of the facility as a nuclear "deception", and U.S. officials insisted Iran had only revealed the facility because it had been discovered by Western intelligence.

The circumstantial evidence, however, suggests that the facility had indeed been started as part of a back-up in the event of a bombing attack on the primary enrichment plant at Natanz and had been made public to neutralize the implicit threat of an Israeli attack which Iranian strategists believed U.S. hoped to use for diplomatic leverage in the talks. That was not an entirely unrealistic assumption. Samore had advocated repeatedly before joining the administration the exploitation by U.S. negotiators of the possibility of an Israeli attack. And in July, Vice-President Joe Biden had ostentatiously flashed an apparent green light for an

Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities should it deem it necessary.

Iran's declaration of the Qom site provided yet another rationale for the Obama administration to adopt a tough and aggressive approach to Iran in the meetings starting October 1. The result was a proposal from the G5 Plus 1 that Iran would ship 80 percent of its low enriched uranium to Russia, which would then go to France for transformation into fuel rods for the Tehran reactor. The real point from the U.S. viewpoint was that Iran would divest itself immediately of the bulk of percent of its LEU, allowing the United States to claim a diplomatic victory. It would take nine to twelve months for Iran to build up enough LEU to have a break-out threat once again.

U.S. officials suggested that the proposal would buy time for the two sides to reach a broader agreement free of the possibility of an Iranian bomb. But the logic of that rationale was faulty. The idea that the Obama administration, having portrayed Iran as bent on acquiring nuclear weapons, and its possession of enough LEU to give it a breakout capability as unacceptable, would turn around a few months later and offer a deal that would allow Iran to accumulate more LEU in the future is hardly credible.

Iranian negotiators did not reject the Western proposal presented at the October 1 meeting. They were under orders to be cooperative, with the obvious aim of depriving the west of a rationale for breaking off the talks and proceeding with new economic sanctions against Iran. But Assistant Secretary of State William Burns, the senior U.S. representative at the meeting in Geneva told reporters on background that the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Saeed Jalili, had agreed that Iran would send 1,200 kilograms of its 1,500 kilograms of LEU in exchange to be exchanged for uranium enriched to 19.75 per cent, as Reuters reported.

A senior Iranian official told Reuters on October 16, however, that Iranian negotiators had not agreed to any Western plan, implying that they had been willing to discuss a deal involving those elements, but had not agreed to any detailed arrangements. The same official made it clear that Iranian negotiators would have no authority to reach agreement on anything at the second round of talks scheduled for October 19-21 in Vienna.

The second round of talks revolved around a draft agreement by the outgoing Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei specifying the amount of Iranian LEU to be shipped to Russia and of 20 percent enriched uranium to be returned to Iran. A French diplomat told the Washington Post that it was “not that far” from what the West’s ideal solution.

On October 21, the final day of the three-day meeting in Vienna, news media again reported that Iranian negotiators had agreed to the ElBaradei plan. Iran’s IAEA representative Ali Asghar Soltanieh suggested the draft was “on the right track” but that, “We have to thoroughly study this text.” ElBaradei himself made it clear there had been no agreement on the text, giving Iran two days for its response to it.

In Tehran, however, public and private discussions of how to respond to the draft took four or five days. Former nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, now the speaker of the parliament, and Alaeddin Boroujerdi, head of the parliamentary committee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, both insisted that Iran should be buying the higher-enriched uranium rather than having to trade its LEU stocks for it.

Iran’s LEU as Bargaining Chips

But there was a more fundamental, objection to the ElBaradei proposal. According to the reformist website Kaleme, Mir Hossein

Mousavi, Ahmadinejad's electoral rival and the leader of the post-election opposition movement, said that, if the conditions demanded by the ElBaradei plan were carried out, "all the efforts of thousands of scientists will go to the wind." Conservative parliamentarian Hesmatollah Falahatpisheh said any deal with the West involving the export of Iran's LEU stocks should be conditioned on ending the economic sanctions on Iran, particularly a lifting of sanctions on raw uranium imports." And Mohsen Rezai, the conservative secretary of the Expediency Council, said that Iran should retain 1,100 kilograms of the roughly 1,500 kilograms of LEU in its stockpile rather than sending 1,200 kilograms abroad, as called for in the ElBaradei plan.

Those objections to the plan all reflected recognition that the ElBaradei draft would deprive Iran of the bargaining leverage they have so painfully accumulated in the form of its LEU stocks. Senior Iranian national security officials had acknowledged in informal conversations that their main purpose in accumulating low enriched uranium was to compel the United States to sit down and bargain seriously with Iran. They had observed that, in the past, before the enrichment program began, the United States exhibited no interest in negotiations. From that strategic perspective, Iran is now in a position to negotiate with the United States in a way that it was not under Rafsanjani and Khatami, thanks to its LEU stocks.

The remarks of Larijani and Boroujerdi about the deal have been widely misinterpreted as evidence of a deep split in the Iranian political elite on how to respond to the ElBaradei plan. The New York Times published two articles in the same week suggesting that the Obama had achieved a major political objective in bringing to light deep fissures in the Iranian leadership over the issue.

But that analysis was based on the assumption that the president had already embraced the western proposal, whereas he had carefully guarded his political-diplomatic flexibility on the issue.

In fact, there is reason to believe that, behind the scenes, a new consensus was being forged between the government and opposition critics of the ElBaradei plan. Mousavi's denunciation of the western plan came on October 29 – the same day Iran's counterproposal was described in the state media.

And when Boroujerdi, the parliamentary committee chairman, called on October 26 for a plan to send Iran's LEU to Russia in several phases and to demand "necessary guarantees" against being tricked, he was describing what would become the Iranian counterproposal to ElBaradei's draft on October 29. Although no official statement was made, the state news agency IRNA indicated that the Iranian proposal called for the LEU shipments to be made in batches rather than in one single shipment and that insisted that the receipt of the uranium for Tehran's medical reactor would have to come before a second batch went out. IRNA called the "simultaneous exchange" feature of the proposal a "red line" in Iran's negotiating position. Another feature of the proposal was the insistence that part of the demand for uranium for the medical reactor be met through straight purchase arrangements.

Although the Iranian counterproposal eliminates everything about the ElBaradei draft that made it attractive to the Obama administration and its allies, the official Iranian response carefully avoided outright rejection of the draft. In fact it reportedly expressed a "positive attitude" and a willingness to hold further talks on it. That was another obvious effort to avoid handing the G5 plus 1 an opportunity to declare an end to the negotiations on the grounds that Iran had refused to negotiate seriously.

When that counterproposal was ignored by Iran's negotiating partners, Ahmadinejad advanced yet another proposal to put roughly a quarter of its LEU under seal by the IAEA on Iranian soil until the uranium for its medical reactor is delivered, rather than sending it abroad. But Obama warned November 15, "We are

now running out of time” for negotiations on the ElBaradei proposal.

It now seems certain that the G5 plus 1 will declare an end to the negotiations before the end of December and move to the next phase of sanctions. Thus the talks with Iran will have ended without having attempted to explore the possibility of a larger bargain with Iran. That would have involved an end to overtly hostile U.S. policies and a symbolic recognition of Iran’s legitimate interests and status in Middle Eastern politics. That the Obama administration did not even try, despite Obama’s commitment to diplomatic engagement, is partly due to the desire of Samore and other advisers to try to impose a diplomatic solution on Iran that could be portrayed as a diplomatic victory over Iran, even if only in the short-term.