

IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERIM AGREEMENT WITH IRAN BEGINS JANUARY 20, PAVING WAY FOR FURTHER NEGOTIATIONS

Although the P5+1 interim agreement with Iran was first reached in late November, ongoing talks have been required to fill in the details of just how the agreement is to be implemented. Those talks came to fruition yesterday with the announcement that on January 20, the six month period of Iran making concessions on enrichment in return for limited sanctions relief will begin. The hope is that this period of pausing progress in Iran's development of nuclear technology and the loosening of some sanctions will provide a window to negotiate a broader agreement that provides verifiable prevention of Iran producing nuclear weapons.

US Secretary of State John Kerry noted the significance of the latest negotiating progress:

We've taken a critical, significant step forward towards reaching a verifiable resolution that prevents Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

On January 20, in just a few short days, we will begin implementation of the Joint Plan of Action that we and our partners agreed to with Iran in Geneva.

As of that day, for the first time in almost a decade, Iran's nuclear program will not be able to advance, and parts of it will be rolled back, while we start negotiating a comprehensive agreement to address the international community's concerns about Iran's program.

Because of the determined and focused work of our diplomats and technical experts, we now have a set of technical understandings for how the parties will fulfill the commitments made at the negotiating table. These understandings outline how the first step agreement will be implemented and verified, as well as the timing of implementation of its provisions.

Iran will voluntarily take immediate and important steps between now and January 20 to halt the progress of its nuclear program. Iran will also continue to take steps throughout the six months to live up to its commitments, such as rendering the entire stockpile of its 20% enriched uranium unusable for further enrichment. As this agreement takes effect, we will be extraordinarily vigilant in our verification and monitoring of Iran's actions, an effort that will be led by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The United States and the rest of our P5+1 partners will also take steps, in response to Iran fulfilling its commitments, to begin providing some limited and targeted relief. The \$4.2 billion in restricted Iranian assets that Iran will gain access to as part of the agreement will be released in regular installments throughout the six months. The final installment will not be available to Iran until the very last day.

That last bit is critical. While the war mongers will be crying about the US giving sanctions relief to Iran, that relief will be doled out over time and only provided as Iran continues to live up to its side of the agreement, with the final portion of funds only coming on the very last day of the six months. Central to this agreement, as previously reported, is that Iran will completely halt its enrichment to 20%

uranium and, by the end of the six month period, will have no stockpile of 20% enriched uranium that is in a chemical form that could rapidly be enriched further to weapons grade.

Kerry appreciates that the six month period will provide a large window in which Congressional war mongers will be doing their best to disrupt the agreement:

We now have an obligation to give our diplomats and experts every chance to succeed in these difficult negotiations. I very much appreciate Congress' critical role in imposing the sanctions that brought Iran to the table, but I feel just as strongly that now is not the time to impose additional sanctions that could threaten the entire negotiating process. Now is not the time for politics. Now is the time for statesmanship, for the good of our country, the region, and the world.

As I pointed out when Robert Menendez put together his bill for further sanctions, that particular bill goes far beyond a mere promise of further sanctions if a final agreement is not reached. Instead, it promises these sanctions even if a final agreement is reached that allows Iran to retain the right of enrichment of uranium below 5%. It has been clear to me from the start that Iran will insist on retaining the right to low level enrichment, and today's Washington Post story on implementation of the agreement makes that point very strongly:

The weeks of bargaining to put the November agreement in force were more difficult than anticipated, with one brief walkout by Iranian envoys and rancor among the bloc of nations that negotiated the deal. Russia and China, long Iran's protectors at the United Nations, pushed the United States to accept technical concessions that further make clear that Iran will retain

the ability to enrich uranium, a key Iranian demand, once a final set of restrictions on its program is approved.

The Obama administration has preferred to blur that point in public, while arguing in private that the enrichment will be a face-saving token that does not pose a threat.

Somehow, Obama and/or Kerry will need to find a way to get Menendez and his fellow war mongers to remove the language from their sanctions bill that sets preconditions for the structure of the final agreement. Further, any new sanctions taking effect during this critical six month period would immediately result in Iran exiting the negotiations and negating the interim agreement.

In essence, there will be parallel sets of negotiations. The P5+1 group will be starting work with Iran on the final agreement in early February while the Obama administration will be emphasizing its plan to veto any new sanctions bill that is passed during the negotiations. Of course, it would be best for Congress to merely abstain from interfering during the negotiations, since a virtually unanimous and instantaneous vote on new, stiffer sanctions would be guaranteed should the negotiations with Iran fail. But since Congress has already shown that they fully intend to pass some sort of bill, I would look for Obama to make a big push to get the automatic triggers, especially any that require Iran to halt even low level enrichment, removed from the bill. A bill requiring verification from Obama or Kerry that the negotiations have failed before the new sanctions are implemented might escape an Obama veto. Posturing on this second set of negotiations has already started. From CNN:

Word of the deal's start date drew mixed reactions from Capitol Hill Sunday.

"I'm concerned that this agreement takes

us down that path where sanctions pressure is relieved, but Iran maintains its ability to produce a nuclear weapon," said House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Rep. Ed Royce, R-California. "Given these stakes, it's regrettable that the President does not want to work with Congress to bolster his negotiating hand with additional sanctions, which would go into effect should Iran fail to meet its commitments."

Rep. Adam Schiff, D-California, called the interim agreement a "meaningful step forward" and said new sanctions would be counterproductive.

"We will know soon enough if Iran is committed to a diplomatic resolution of its nuclear program. If it is not, new sanctions will move with lightning speed out of the Congress and with my full support," he said. "Many obstacles remain, and I continue to be skeptical of Tehran's willingness to abandon pursuit of nuclear weapons technology, but I am also fully convinced that we must try the diplomatic path."

Note that even Schiff, who seems to be taking Obama's side in preferring to let the negotiations continue before Congress acts, reserves some skepticism over Iran giving up pursuit of nuclear weapons. The inability of Congress to see that even before Rouhani was elected there were signs that Iran was slowing its nuclear work is disappointing. In fact, I fear that the Menendez bill, or a similar bill calling for new stiffer sanctions even if a final agreement allows low level enrichment could override an Obama veto. Such a bill would be an unmitigated disaster and lead to a war with Iran, but it seems like a very distinct possibility unless there is a rare outbreak of sanity on Capitol Hill.