

FRAMEWORK IN PLACE FOR P5+1, IRAN FINAL NUCLEAR NEGOTIATIONS

After several days of warnings from both sides not to expect too much from the current round of talks between the P5+1 group of countries and Iran on Iran's nuclear program, we have word today that the two sides have agreed to the framework under which the negotiations are to proceed. Furthermore, the date for the next formal session has been announced and the head negotiator for the P5+1 side will visit Tehran a week before the full session.

Here is George Jahn of AP on today's announcement:

Iran and six world powers ended the opening round of nuclear talks on an upbeat note Thursday, with both sides saying they had agreed on a plan for further negotiations meant to produce a comprehensive deal to set limits on Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

In a joint statement, they said the next round of negotiations would begin in Vienna on March 17, continuing a process likely to take at least six months and probably longer.

Expectations had been modest as the talks started Tuesday, and the upbeat tone on a framework for future talks appeared aimed in part to encourage skeptics inside and outside Iran that the negotiations had a chance to succeed despite huge gaps between the Iranians and the six powers.

More from Reuters:

"We have had three very productive days during which we have identified all of the issues we need to address in

reaching a comprehensive and final agreement,” EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton told reporters.

“There is a lot to do. It won’t be easy but we have made a good start,” said Ashton who speaks on behalf of the six powers – the United States, Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany.

Senior diplomats from the six nations, as well as Ashton and Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif will meet again on March 17, also in Vienna, and hold a series of further discussions ahead of the July deadline.

Tehran says its nuclear program has no military aims and has signaled repeatedly it would resist dismantling its nuclear installations as part of any deal.

“I can assure you that no-one had, and will have, the opportunity to impose anything on Iran during the talks,” Zarif told reporters after the Vienna meeting.

A senior U.S. official cautioned their discussions will be “difficult” but the sides were committed to reach a deal soon.

“This will be a complicated, difficult and lengthy process. We will take the time required to do it right,” the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. “We will continue to work in a deliberate and concentrated manner to see if we can get that job done.”

It is reported in multiple sources (including Fars News), that Catherine Ashton will visit Tehran March 9-10, ahead of the March 17-20 negotiations that will take place in Vienna. It appears that Ashton and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif will be holding monthly meetings as

the talks progress.

There are a number of upbeat stories at Mehr News, Fars News and PressTV today about the agreement, although there also is still a story from the head of the IGRC noting that the negotiations are “prone to problems”.

Zarif spoke to reporters in remarks that appear to have been delivered after the press conference:

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif reiterated that Tehran and the world powers didn't discuss military and scientific issues in their talks, and underlined that Iran will not dismantle any of its nuclear installations.

“We are focused merely on the nuclear issues and the negotiations don't include defensive and scientific issues and everyone has accepted that Iran's defensive capability is no the subject for the negotiations,” Zarif said, addressing Iranian reporters in Vienna on Thursday after meeting EU Foreign Policy Chief Catherine Ashton who heads the Group 5+1 (the US, Russia, China, Britain and France plus Germany) delegations in the talks with Iran.

“We won't close any (nuclear) site and have announced that no one should prescribe anything or dictate a solution to the Iranian nation; the way to ensure the peaceful nature of our program is not closing the sites, rather its peaceful nature should be displayed openly, transparently and based on the international regulations and supervision,” he added.

From those remarks, it appears that Zarif feels that it has been agreed that Iran's missile program will not be a part of the negotiations. Note also that Iran considers the Parchin site to be a defense installation, so this comment

first referring to defense issues being off the table but then talking about openness and transparency seems to be dancing between keeping Parchin off limits to inspectors and opening it. Despite these uncertainties, though, another article from Fars News describing this part of Zarif's comments has a very interesting passage:

“We agreed that no one ‘surprises’ the other side with new claims,” Zarif said.

That bit must come as a huge disappointment to the crews in Israeli and US intelligence operations who “find” new documents whenever they need to disrupt diplomatic progress.