

WITH DEAL IN SIGHT, PRESSURE MOUNTS ON ALL SIDES FOR P5+1, IRAN

Fars News reports that Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and Catherine Ashton, chief negotiator for the European Union, will meet for lunch tomorrow just before the next round of P5+1 talks with Iran kick off in Geneva later in the afternoon. But even though an interim agreement that would freeze Iran's current nuclear work in return for a release of some impounded funds to Iran while a longer term agreement is finalized seems more likely than not, those who oppose any deal are desperately lashing out at the last minute. This morning, two bomb blasts near the Iranian embassy in Beirut killed more than twenty and injured well over a hundred. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has ramped up his rhetoric even further, making the outrageous claim that Iran has on hand sufficient uranium enriched to 5% to make up to five bombs within a few weeks of a "breakout". Meanwhile, US President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry seem to have quelled for now any Congressional attempts to ratchet up sanctions ahead of this week's negotiations, but should no agreement emerge this week, look for Washington politicians to race one another to see who can introduce the most severe new sanctions.

Although Beirut has seen several attacks back and forth recently with various Sunni and Shia groups attacking one another, the timing of today's blasts suggest that the nuclear negotiations may be a target, as well. The Reuters article informs us that an al Qaeda group has claimed responsibility:

A Lebanese-based al Qaeda-linked group known as the Abdullah Azzam Brigades claimed responsibility for what it

described as a double suicide attack on the Iranian mission in southern Beirut.

Lebanon has suffered a series of bomb attacks and clashes linked to the 2-1/2-year-old conflict in neighboring Syria.

Security camera footage showed a man in an explosives belt rushing towards the outer wall of the embassy before blowing himself up, Lebanese officials said.

They said the second explosion was caused by a car bomb parked two buildings away from the compound.

But the Syrian information minister goes further, blaming Israel and Saudi Arabia for supporting the attack:

Syrian Information Minister Omran Zoabi implicitly blamed Saudi Arabia and Qatar for supporting radical militants, who have been accused for previous attacks against Shi'ite targets.

Just as they have been working together to arm and fund Sunni fighters for Syria, Israel and Saudi Arabia have joined together to fight against any agreements between the West and Iran on nuclear technology.

The pending deal on Iran's nuclear technology has been described by Al-Monitor:

The draft text that the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) presented to Iran on Nov. 9 would cover six months while a final deal is negotiated. The contents of this first-step agreement reportedly include increased inspections and monitoring of Iran's nuclear facilities; new limits on enrichment, including suspension of enrichment at the 20% level; and a freeze on centrifuges and dual assembly development at the Arak heavy-water reactor, all in return for

less than \$10 billion in sanctions relief, which means unfreezing some Iranian assets held in banks abroad and waivers on sanctions on auto sales, petrochemicals and precious metals, as Laura Rozen writes this week.

But Netanyahu simply won't stand for that. In today's Jerusalem Post, we see this:

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu kept up his unrelenting lobbying against any interim deal with Iran when nuclear talks resume in Geneva this week, saying that Iran already has five bombs worth of lower enriched uranium.

Netanyahu's comments came during an interview with Germany's Bild newspaper, published on Tuesday. Government officials explained that this amount of uranium enriched at a lower level means that it would take relatively little effort – a matter of weeks – for the Islamic Republic to turn it into higher-grade uranium that would make up the fissile material needed for five nuclear bombs.

Is there any basis for this claim? If we return to the latest IAEA report (pdf) that came out last week, we see that Iran has on hand 7154 kg of low enriched uranium (enriched to 5% or less). Recall that Bibi's famous "red line" was coined in reference to Iran's stock of 20% enriched uranium, where 200-250 kg is seen as sufficient for further enrichment to produce enough for one warhead. On first blush, then, 7154 kg at 5% would correspond to 1789 kg at 20%, or enough for almost nine warheads. But the enrichment process is not 100% efficient. From the same report, we see that at Natanz, in its Pilot Fuel Enrichment Plant, 1541 kg of 5% enriched uranium were fed into centrifuges and only 189 kg of 20% enriched uranium was recovered. Applying that same conversion

efficiency, the 7154 kg of 5% enriched uranium could produce only 877 kg of 20% enriched uranium. This would be slightly over four warheads' worth at 200 kg for each. But how realistic is the claim Iran could divert all of its existing stockpile of 5% enriched uranium into weapons grade? IAEA inspectors are on-site at both enrichment sites, Fordow and Natanz, at least once a week. Only if Iran kicked out the IAEA inspectors for the entire period while the extra enrichment occurs could Netanyahu's claim have any merit. And of course, kicking out the inspectors would trigger an instant response from a suddenly united West that is currently seeing strains in internal relationships over just how to handle the ongoing negotiations.

Iran's negotiators are under pressure, as well, with a group of legislators banding together to insist that Iran not give up on enrichment to 20% (while this post was being written, Reuters updated the linked story, changing the headline from the 5:20 am version "Iranian lawmakers demand government stick to nuclear program" to the 9:21 am version "Iran says path open for solution to nuclear dispute", but a reference to the move by legislators persists in the later version).

Many signs point to this week as being decisive on whether diplomacy or violence will be the route taken by the various participants in this complex series of interactions. Diplomacy appears to have a small, but fragile, lead. Whether it succeeds remains to be seen.