

# *Iran, U.S. & the Nuclear File* | **Trita Parsi\***

## **Abstract**

*The article addresses the virtual stalemate in international talks on the Iranian nuclear enrichment program, and the effects on the Middle East and the South Caucasus, given that the stalemate has elevated the likelihood of a military solution. The author argues that neither the latest attempt at talks nor Obama's negotiations with Iran in October 2009 constitute an exhaustion of diplomatic means, and that the collapse of the talks is not due to insurmountable differences between the two sides, but rather, the domestic political constraints that throughout the Obama administration's term have disabled the parties from making the necessary compromises to reach a deal. Further, the author observes that by all accounts, a military confrontation would be devastating for the region as a whole including the Caucasus: while the risk for war is certainly increasing, it is by no means inevitable.*

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With the near-stalemate of the talks between the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council + Germany (P5+1) and Iran, calls for military action will begin anew. Yet neither the latest attempt at talks nor Obama's negotiations with Iran in October 2009 constitute an exhaustion of diplomatic means. In neither case did the talks collapse due to insurmountable differences between the two sides. Rather, throughout the Obama administration's term, domestic political constraints have disabled the parties from making the necessary compromises to reach a deal.

In October 2009, the negotiations collapsed, ostensibly due to Iran's refusal to accept the Russian-American fuel swap proposal. Washington wanted Iran to ship out 1,200 of its low enriched uranium to Russia, which in turn would re-enrich it to 19.75 percent. Russia would then send it to France for the production of fuel pads for the Tehran Research Reactor. Iran would receive the fuel pads approximately 12 months after it shipped out its LEU.

The Iranian objected to the deal on the grounds that they would have to accept the highest level of risk. Bearing in mind Iran's distrust of the West – which is reflected in Western mistrust of Iran – handing over Iran's strategic asset (the LEU) only to receive fuel pads a full year later

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entailed too great a risk for Tehran. There were no guarantees that the West wouldn't renege on the deal once the LEU had left Iranian soil, it argued. In the talks, Iran sought mechanisms to guarantee that both sides would honor the deal. But Iran's amendments were unacceptable to the U.S. and the talk eventually collapsed.

In reality, however, the real problem Tehran faced was not the unequal distribution of risk in the American-Russian proposal, but rather the domestic political tensions inside Iran following the fraudulent presidential elections. None of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's rivals – conservative or reformists – wanted to see him reap the benefits of having struck a deal with the U.S. They all came out against the swap, not necessarily to scuttle the talks, but to make sure that Ahmadinejad would not be able to score domestic political points through it.

A few months later, it was again domestic politics that undermined diplomacy, but this time in the U.S. To everyone's surprise, Turkey and Brazil managed in May 2010 to get Iran to agree to a fuel swap proposal based on the benchmarks of the

earlier Russian-American proposal. But Washington immediately rejected their successful mediation effort, arguing that facts on the ground had changed. The fuel swap was beyond its sell-by date, they argued, since Iran's stockpile had increased and since Tehran had begun enriching uranium at the 20 per cent level. Any new swap had to take these factors into consideration, and require Iran to ship out more than 1,200kg of LEU.

This took Ankara and Brasilia by surprise since in a letter dated April 20, 2010, President Obama had explicitly urged Turkey and Brazil to ship out 1,200kg of LEU, making no mention of the 20 percent enrichment issue.

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To Brazil and Turkey, it appeared that Washington had rejected its own deal and its own instructions of only three weeks earlier. By the time the new fuel swap had been negotiated, Russia and China had already agreed to a new UN Security Council resolution sanctioning Iran. Between the UN sanctions and a nuclear breakthrough, Obama chose the sanctions fearing the outcry from Congress if sanctions

were not imposed on Tehran. Crucial mid-term elections were only a few months away and Obama had promised Congress that sanctions on Iran would be imposed. He had to either break his promise to Turkey and Brazil, or to Congress. He chose international crises with two allies rather than a domestic political crisis.

Similarly, U.S. elections and domestic politics are instructive in understanding the outcome of the recent Moscow talks. Pressure on the Obama administration from members of Congress—both Republicans and Democrats—and from Israel grew considerably after the successful meeting in Istanbul in April.

Demands were made that Obama should not offer Iran any sanctions relief in return for nuclear concessions. A House resolution was passed with overwhelming majority, using Bibi Netanyahu's red line on the nuclear issue (no enrichment) instead of Obama's (no nuclear weapon).

To the White House, this meant that if a small interim deal was struck, the domestic political cost would be considerable. Obama's Republican opponents, as well as his fellow Democrats in Congress, would chastise him for having offered Iran too much if the sanctions were touched, or if Obama honored his earlier signal that limited enrichment on Iranian soil under strict inspections. Consequently, the political cost of a

small deal was deemed higher than the political cost of no deal.

In the short term, the White House's calculation seems to have been correct. The talks failed to produce an agreement—and *no one* in Washington complained. There were no sustained attacks from the Republicans. No complaints from Netanyahu. Democrats in Congress stayed silent. In fact, Obama was praised for having stood firm—and for refusing to reach a compromise.

The danger of these aborted efforts at diplomacy is that the risk of war will increase – even though diplomacy has not been exhausted. Such a scenario would be disastrous for the region, including the Caucasus.

It is impossible to predict how such a war would develop. Yet, based on Iran's experience from the Iraq-Iran war, where the war took place on Iranian soil for six out of the eight years, where Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against Iranian civilians and military alike, and where Iraq's superior missile technology made life in Tehran unbearable, it is fair to assume that Iran will seek to expand the war at the earliest possible stage in order to ensure that it fights its enemies on foreign rather than domestic soil.

This may not be limited to existing war theatres such as Syria and Afghanistan; it could expand into the Caucasus, and in particular Azerbaijan due to

the Azerbaijani government's close military and intelligence ties to Israel. The destabilizing potential for this escalation is considerable. Georgian government officials, for instance, worry that the US's engagement with Iran will provide Russia with an opportunity to reinvade its southern neighbor.

These devastating consequences are fully preventable – if only diplomacy is given the time, space and courage it needs to succeed.