Iran Courts Restart Nuke Talks, but Snubs UN

BRIAN MURPHY, Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran has floated specific dates for reopening talks with the U.S. and other world powers about its nuclear program. At the same time, Tehran has left U.N. nuclear inspectors empty-handed when it comes to addressing Western suspicions that it's conducting tests related to nuclear weapons.

Iran's split personality over creating space for possible nuclear concessions has complicated calculations by Washington and allies on whether to head back into negotiations more than six months after the last round ended in stalemate. But it also offers insight into Tehran's strategy as Western sanctions press harder on the economy, experts say.

Iranian leaders know the only route to ease the economic pressures — and possibly undercut threats of military action by Israel — is through potential deal-making with six world powers — the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany.

Making grand gestures to the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, would likely bring praise from the West, but it is unlikely to roll back

sanctions, which have so far reduced Iran's critical oil exports by 45 percent.

"Tehran ... sees any cooperation with the IAEA as a potential bargaining chip that is better reserved for the talks that really matter," said Suzanne Maloney, an Iranian affairs expert at the Brookings Institution in Washington. "The Iranians want a payout and the IAEA cannot deliver that."

Iran has proposed restarting talks as early as next month. But while Iran's desire to revive dialogue with the world powers suggests an acknowledgment that the sanctions have taken a bite out of its economy, there still are no clear signals on whether it means a greater willingness to make concessions.

Three rounds of talks last year made no headway on the West's main demand: That Iran halt its highest-level uranium enrichment.

Washington and others worry this level of nuclear fuel, at 20 percent enrichment, could be turned into warhead-grade material much faster than the 3.5 percent enriched uranium needed for Iran's lone energy-producing reactor.

Iran insists it does not seek nuclear arms — repeatedly citing a 2005 edict by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei that called atomic weapons a violation of Islamic tenets — and says it only wants reactors for electricity and medical research.

For Iranian negotiators, the only workable compromise is seen as part of a reciprocal pact: The easing of Western sanctions in return for promises to trim

uranium enrichment. So far, however, the U.S. and its allies have given no indication of favoring such a deal. Instead, they have moved to further tighten the economic squeeze and isolate Iran.

Iranian envoys appear to favor getting the dialogue restarted to at least keep channels open with Washington. That could also gain support from the Obama administration, which favors diplomatic efforts to end the nuclear standoff. Critics, including Israel's Prime Benjamin Netanyahu, contend Iran is only seeking to drag out negotiations while it expands its stockpile of enriched uranium.

"Iran's leaders are adopting a grand-bargain strategy," said Mehrzad Boroujerdi, a Syracuse University professor who follows Iranian affairs. "They don't want to get bogged down with the IAEA and see the only way to get what they want — meaning getting some sanctions off their back — is through the world power talks."

But Iran's cold shoulder to U.N. envoys could further weaken Western interest in reopening talks, leading to another dead end.

In Washington, State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said Friday that the U.S. was disappointed that "once again" Iran and the IAEA failed to agree on allowing inspectors to visit a military site, known as Parchin, where the U.N. agency suspects Iran might have carried out nuclear weapon trigger tests.

The agency has visited Parchin twice — the last time in 2005. But at the time, it did not have access to satellite imagery and new intelligence presumably supplied by

the United States, Israel and other IAEA member states. Iran says it wants assurances from the IAEA that the Parchin file will be closed for good if it allows another tour of Parchin and nothing is detected.

Herman Nackaerts, who headed the IAEA team, said the two sides would meet again on Feb. 12 in the Iranian capital. That's after Iran's proposed timeframe to restart talks with the world powers talks. The official IRNA news agency reported that envoys were working on an early February resumption.

There has been no official response from Washington or the European Union's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, but reopening talks that quickly appears difficult without even an agreement on where they would be held.

Iranian authorities, meantime, have been increasingly candid about the blows from sanctions, including plans for an austerity budget in March that will include new and highly unpopular taxes. Last week, the head of parliament's budget committee, Gholam Reza Kateb, said Iran's revenues from oil and gas exports have dropped by 45 percent. The country's currency also has fallen by more than 40 percent since last year.

On Saturday, Iran's IAEA delegate, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, repeated Tehran's insistence that it will never fully halt uranium enrichment, which is permitted under the U.N. nuclear proliferation accords signed by Iran and most other nations.

"Khamenei now has material imperatives as well as some political space to negotiate," said the analyst Maloney. "But any deal must satisfy the hardline base that remains deeply distrustful of the international community and confident in Iran's capacity to withstand hardship."

Another political twist for Iran could be the elections in June to pick a successor to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has been significantly weakened by attempts to challenge the authority of Khamenei and the ruling clerics.

Ahmadinejad's opponents might want to postpone any kind of serious nuclear negotiations with the West until after the elections to avoid giving his administration a higher profile in its final months. At the same time, hardline factions also could be wary of making any kind of major concessions to the West before the vote, which is expected to bring a Khamenei loyalist to office.

"There could be a tendency now to stick to the old, radical approach for now," said Rasool Nafisi, an Iranian affairs analyst at Strayer University in Virginia. "They don't want to be the ones who blink first in the showdowns with the West."

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