

Peering over Lady Ashton's Shoulder before the Iran Negotiations

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Articles & Testimony

Negotiations between Iran and the world's leading powers in Geneva wrapped up yesterday, with a pledge by the parties to resume talks in Istanbul at the end of January. Here's what Foreign Policy contributor Simon Henderson, who released a paper on the talks and traveled to Switzerland to see them up close, had to say:

Geneva: European High Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton, who chaired nuclear talks Monday and Tuesday between the so-called E3+3 (Britain, France, German plus the U.S., Russia, China) and Iran, retains a common touch.

Not for her an executive jet; she flew commercial from London Sunday, eschewing the proffered British Airways champagne for a glass of water with ice and lemon. She spent the flight reading her briefing documents. It's a fair bet that the surprise weekend announcement by Iran of its first indigenously mined uranium ore, known as yellowcake, wasn't part of her reading material.

The news allowed Iran to claim it has mastered the nuclear fuel cycle. Until now, international concern has focused on Iran's efforts to develop centrifuge enrichment technology as well as the capacity to make plutonium -- both potential fuels for an atomic bomb. But it meant that Ashton started off on Monday slightly on a back foot. The Iranian delegate Saeed Jalili, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, pitched that Iran is entitled to master all aspects of peaceful nuclear technology. The E3+3, also known as the P5+1, are concerned that, like the proverbial duck, Iran's nuclear work looks and sounds like a weapons program.

Jalili also asked for condemnation of two attacks on Iranian nuclear scientists in Tehran on November 29. One died, the other -- who was subject to a U.N. travel ban because of his nefarious activities -- was injured. Blame is being placed on the long arm of the Mossad, Israel's secret service. Ashton, who is often criticized for lack of experience, obliged.

Arguably, Ashton should have thought of a better response, something along the lines about condemning all terrorism, a wording which would have also included Iran's subversive activities. She certainly knew about the attacks: fellow passengers on her commercial flight to Geneva noticed that she closely studied the long article about them in that day's London Observer newspaper.

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