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US zizags on Iran as Brazilian and Turkish leaders head for Tehran

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Brazilian president in Moscow

Washington seems to be in two minds on key aspects of Iran's nuclear and missile programs, providing momentum for the Brazilian and Turkish leaders to promote their mediation bid in Tehran Sunday, May 16, **DEBKAFfile** reports from Washington and Tehran.

Tuesday, May 11, President Barack Obama's nuclear adviser Gary Samore told reporters that "setbacks in Iran's uranium enrichment program have significantly delayed its progress towards building a nuclear weapon." Three days later, on Friday, May 14, an official at the UN nuclear watchdog's Vienna headquarters contradicted him: "Iran has set up new equipment that will allow it to boost its efficiency in enriching uranium at higher levels," the anonymous source told reporters.

Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Turkish prime minister Tayyip Erdogan meanwhile plan to launch a diplomatic initiative to bridge the gaps between Iran and the bloc of five UN Security Council powers and Germany over its offer to process Iran's low-grade enriched uranium overseas to 19.5 percent, to prevent Iran making the short jump to weapons grade material.

Iran has meanwhile claimed it can produce its own high-grade (19.5 percent) uranium, without recourse to the six-power offer.

There are other gaps for the would-be brokers to address. And so the Brazilian president dropped in on Russian president Dmitry Medvedev in Moscow Friday and will meet Erdogan before they present their proposal to the Iranian leaders Sunday. Their offer to top up the uranium enrichment process outside Iran in Brazil, Turkey or Russia came up in Medvedev's talks with Syrian president Bashar Assad in Damascus Tuesday and with Erdogan in Ankara Wednesday.

Thursday, President Obama was on the phone to the Russian president, sounding amenable. He did not object to the new mediation bids, in which Moscow too has a stake, he said and if there is progress, he will take note.

But the day before, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton opted for the reverse tack.

She warned the Turkish and Brazilian foreign ministers that Iran is not serious about accepting international demands to prove its nuclear program peaceful. "Tehran must face fresh penalties unless it does a quick about-face and complies," she said, adding, "In our view, Iran's recent diplomacy was an attempt to stop Security Council action without actually taking steps to address international concerns about its nuclear program."

A third tack came from London Wednesday, when the International Institute for Strategic Studies, which has close ties with the US intelligence community, determinedly played down Iran's ballistic missile capabilities in "a net assessment."

Some Middle East sources inferred from this surprising report and the confusing signals from Washington of the last week that, rather than going all out to curb Iran's nuclear weapons program, Washington and London are intent on blocking the road to sanctions.