

Fearing war and social unrest, Iran's bourgeois regime seeks rapprochement with Washington

By Keith Jones
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Iran's political establishment and press are, with just a few dissenting voices, presenting the trip that the country's new president made to New York and the United Nations General Assembly last week as a diplomatic triumph. President Hassan Rouhani's reputed "charm offensive" culminated in a 15-minute telephone conversation with US President Barack Obama—the first high-level interaction between Iranian and US officials since the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

Earlier, the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany) had agreed that their representatives would meet with Iranian officials to discuss Iran's nuclear program in Geneva on October 15 and 16.

US intelligence estimates have repeatedly conceded that there is no evidence Iran is seeking to develop nuclear weapons and Iran has repeatedly vowed that it will not do so. Yet the US and its European allies bullied the UN Security Council into imposing sanctions against Iran, then over the past two years jointly implemented far tougher sanctions with the explicit aim of strangling Iran's economy.

Rouhani has nonetheless repeatedly declared that the nuclear dispute can be quickly resolved.

The reality is the Obama administration continues to pursue the same goal as that of every US administration since the 1979 Revolution—to return Iran to the type of neocolonial subjugation that prevailed under the murderous regime of the Shah. Indeed the historic decline in the world position of the US and the revolutionary upsurge that toppled longstanding US-backed dictators in Tunisia and Egypt have lent a new urgency to Washington's drive to assert unbridled US hegemony over North Africa and the Middle East.

Under Obama, the US is waging an economic war against Iran, trying to cut off its oil exports and, through severe penalties that threaten the world's banks and shipping insurance companies if they break an embargo on financial transactions with Iran, its entire trade. Moreover, no administration has more frequently threatened the Iranian people with war.

Last month, when the US made a last-minute retreat from launching military action against Syria, a key Iranian ally, Obama went out of his way to reiterate that Washington continues to actively prepare for war on Iran. Declared Obama, "My suspicion is that the Iranians recognize that they shouldn't draw a lesson

that [since] we haven't struck [Syria]...we won't strike Iran."

And the threats continue. On Thursday the chief US nuclear negotiator with Iran, Wendy Sherman, told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Obama administration would urge the Senate to adopt a new sanctions bill mirroring that ratified by the House of Representatives in July, if Iran doesn't "come on the 15th of October" prepared to take "concrete, substantive actions" subject to US "monitoring and verification." The House legislation targets Iran's shipping, construction, and automobile sectors, seeks to enforce a ban on all Iranian trade using the Euro and to eliminate all Iranian oil exports by 2015.

In an oblique response to the bellicose anti-Iran speech Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu gave at the UN earlier this week, US Secretary of State John Kerry told reporters Thursday that "it would be diplomatic malpractice of the worst order" not to explore whether the US can achieve its objectives through negotiations "before you ask people to take military action."

Kerry's remarks underscore that the Obama administration, having encountered mass popular opposition in the US and around the world to its plans to strike Syria, has a multi-track policy in regard to Iran.

Through "negotiations"—backed by one of the most extensive and punitive economic sanctions regimes ever imposed and the threat of war—it intends to press the Islamic Republic to make far-reaching concessions, effectively accepting US hegemony over the region. While so doing, Washington aims to probe the many fissures within Iran's ruling elite with a view to leveraging them in a future explicit campaign for "regime change" and to mount a propaganda offensive aimed at justifying before the American public a future resort to war.

The Iranian elite is not oblivious to all this. But they have been rattled by the impact of the sanctions and the gyrations in world oil prices caused by the world economic crisis.

During the last Persian calendar year, which ended on March 20, the country's economy contracted by 5.4 percent, reports Iran's Statistical Center. According to a report from the Central Bank, industrial production has been especially hard hit. Between the fall of 2010 when it was expanding at 10 percent and the fall of 2012, Iran's industrial production experienced 27 percent negative growth or contracted by more than a quarter.

The new government admits that the inflation rate is running 40

percent and that the previous government's estimate of three million unemployed vastly understates the situation. A Mehr News Agency poll of Teheran residents found 43 percent had a family member who is unemployed. The rise in prices and joblessness has squeezed incomes of broad sections of the population, especially the working class. A Central Bank study of household expenditure found that between the 2008-9 Persian calendar year and the 2010-11, food consumption declined by 7 percent.

Above all the Iranian bourgeoisie fears the impact of this crisis on class relations—that it could spark a working-class challenge to the Islamic Republic.

The current clerical-led bourgeois regime was consolidated in the early 1980s through ferocious suppression of the left and all independent working-class organizations and limited social reforms. Today—when under the combined impact of the world economic crisis and the US-led sanctions, the regime is targeting what remains of those limited social reforms—it seeks rapprochement with Washington to relieve the pressure and strengthen its hand against the working class.

Those now leading Iran's government also believe that they have some "chips to play" in effecting an accommodation with the US. In May 2003, that is immediately following the US invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime, Teheran made a secret offer of a "grand bargain" to the administration of George W. Bush. In exchange for the lifting of sanctions and a commitment from Washington not to seek regime change, Iran pledged to help the US in the "political stabilization" of Iraq, cease providing material support to Hamas, pressure Hezbollah to disband its armed wing, and accept a Saudi plan under which Israel's legitimacy as a sovereign state would ultimately be recognized.

While publicly Iran's government does not speak in these terms, such measures remain central to its calculations. In an August 28 article, Seyed Hossein Mousavian—a former Iranian diplomat who worked closely with Rouhani when he was Iran's chief nuclear negotiator and is rumored to be acting as an informal conduit between Teheran and Washington—argued that with the Middle East in turmoil and even Turkey "losing its position," the US and the West "are without a friendly base in the Middle East." He then touted Iran's role in helping the US in constructing a puppet government to replace the Taliban at the Bonn December 2001 international conference on Afghanistan as "a blueprint for a new collaboration."

Iran's new government also hopes to win the favour of Washington and its European allies by emphasizing Teheran's readiness to partner with foreign capital. The leading economic ministries are now crowded with allies and protégés of Hashemi Rafsanjani. Reputed to be one of Iran's wealthiest businessmen, Rafsanjani, as Iran's president from 1989-97, imposed IMF restructuring, including wholesale privatization, and welcomed burgeoning EU investment. As one commentator noted, "the ministers of the economic group [in Rouhani's government] share two characteristics: their proximity to Rafsanjani and their adoption of economic neo-liberalism... [The government's] global neo-liberal economic outlook will remove many barriers in Iranian-US relations..."

Iran's ruling elite has long been riven by bitter factional disputes, with Iran's relations with the US very much at their center.

Thus far, however, there has been vocal support from across the official political spectrum for Rouhani's overtures to Washington. After Rouhani briefed Iran's parliament on his New York trip, 230 of the 290 Majlis deputies signed a statement lauding the president for having presented Iran as a "powerful and peace-seeking" country that "seeks talks and interaction for the settlement of regional and international issues." The speaker of the Majlis, Ali Larijani, a leader of the Principalist or conservative faction also spoke strongly in support of Rouhani, saying his actions in New York mean "nuclear negotiations can no longer be conducted with the past pattern and literature." And while the head of the Revolutionary Guards, Ali Jafari, criticized Rouhani for speaking to Obama before the US had rolled back any of its anti-Iranian measures, he nonetheless voiced support, saying overall Iran's president had taken "firm and appropriate positions" while in New York.

Undoubtedly the strong support Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has indicated for Rouhani's overtures to the Obama administration has played a role in muting criticism within the clerical-political establishment.

But more fundamentally the current, albeit fragile, unity is born of the common fear among all elite factions of the explosive international and social predicament now confronting the bourgeoisie, and above all the possibility that Iran's deteriorating economic situation will provoke unrest within the working class.

As the statements of Obama, Kerry and their aides indicate, Washington's diplomacy with Teheran could end even more abruptly than it began. The White House has already let it be known that the Iranians are in for "sticker shock" when hard bargaining begins.

Were, however, a deal to be reached, it would be a predatory pact between the world's most powerful and rapacious imperialism and a venal reactionary bourgeois regime—a pact aimed at the interests of the Iranian working class and the peoples of the Middle East.

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