As verdict nears, US, Britain maintain silence on frame-up of Iranian Jews

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Attorneys for 10 Iranian Jews accused of spying for Israel submitted their written defence before a Revolutionary Court in Shiraz, southern Iran, on June 6. According to Iranian law, the judge is required to announce a verdict within a week. Three other Jews accused of belonging to the espionage network are free on bail.

The trial, which began April 13, has all the hallmarks of a judicial frame-up. It is being held under conditions that contravene all acceptable judicial norms. A Revolutionary Court judge acts as investigator, prosecutor and judge, and appoints the defence counsel. The trial is held in secret.

Some of the 13 were arrested in January 1999, while others were jailed in March of last year. The first of the defendants, Hamid Tefilin, is a shoe salesman. He was arrested eighteen months ago and held for five months incommunicado. The prisoners include shopkeepers, teachers and a 17-year-old student.

Defence lawyers have argued that the men should be acquitted, as the prosecution has not produced any evidence or witnesses to back up its case. The state's case rests on the fact that nine of the thirteen men have admitted in court to involvement in espionage, some in televised confessions. The confessions were made without the presence of a lawyer.

Relatives insist the prisoners confessed under duress, after being held in solitary confinement for more than a year. Family visits have been limited to five minutes. Defence lawyers Shirzad Rahmani and Esmail Naseri-Mojarrad said their cross-examination of six of the accused showed that some of them had lied in their confessions.

Amongst those who have confessed is Asher Zadmehr, the senior religious leader of the Orthodox Jews of Shiraz. There are already reports of increased repression and violence against Iran's Jewish community, and a verdict against one of its main religious leaders would inevitably fuel anti-Semitic sentiment.

Local Jewish leaders have called the trial the worst event to befall Iran's 30,000 Jews in recent memory. A Jewish textile shop in Tehran was recently burnt down in an arson attack. Media reports from Iran state that Jews, including children, are experiencing harassment on the street, at work and in school. There are reports of anti-Jewish graffiti and fears of an economic boycott of Jewish-owned shops. Defence lawyer Esmail Naseri said, "The whole country is watching these confessions. Iranian Jews are becoming more isolated and their children are regarded with contempt by classmates."

Two hard-line Shia Muslim Ayatollahs have said the death penalty should be imposed if guilt is proven. There is every indication that Tehran's Mullahs have mounted the trial to whip up Islamic fanaticism and anti-Semitism in an attempt to bolster flagging support for their regime, which suffered heavy defeats in recent elections, with the vast bulk of parliamentary seats going to pro-Western elements around President Khatami.

Western governments have made only the most perfunctory criticisms of the trial. The frame-up has, moreover, received only minimal coverage in European and US newspapers, and even less on television. The downplaying of an event which in the past would have occasioned widespread denunciations of the Tehran regime can only be explained in light of recent overtures by the Western powers towards Iran.

The past year has seen a flurry of diplomatic and economic activity by the major European powers seeking friendlier relations with Tehran. Companies such as Italy's ENI, France's Elf Aquitaine and Total and Britain's Royal Dutch Shell have signed sizeable energy deals. In April this year, nine leading oil and gas companies, including BP-Amoco and British Gas, agreed to carry out a gas utilisation study for Iran, which has the world's second largest reserves. The Caspian Sea, which borders on Iran, is believed to have the world's third richest reserves of hydrocarbons after the Persian Gulf and Siberia.

Following a visit by a British parliamentary delegation to Tehran in November 1999, Labour MP Peter Temple-Morris wrote in the *Guardian* newspaper that it was “essential for Britain, and the EU [European Union] in general, to engage

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in a dialogue with Iran ... with its population of some 65 million, its rich natural resources, large oil reserves and its pivotal position, [it] is surely one of the most important geopolitical countries."

Such considerations have shaped the response of Britain and other European powers to the Shiraz trial. In the same *Guardian* article, Temple-Morris advised religious minorities such as the Jews in Shiraz to "live their lives but without evangelism" and "take care" over "their international contacts." This statement was made in the context of noting the arrest of the 13 defendants.

On May 5 of this year the *Guardian*'s Tehran correspondent Geneive Abdo went further still, denouncing Western coverage of the Shiraz trial for allegedly showing an anti-Iranian bias and opposing any criticism of the extracted confessions. She attacked the BBC and supported the complaints of Iranian newspapers that in the Western media "there was an assumption that the suspects were innocent".

The fact that the European powers are not prepared to allow the Shiraz trial to interfere with their rapprochement with Iran was epitomised in a May 18 decision by the World Bank to approve loans to Iran totalling $232 million. Germany backed the loans most strongly, in the face of protests by Jewish groups world-wide and a formal statement by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright urging a delay in the loans while Iran was conducting a show trial. Notwithstanding the official US position, Washington's opposition to the loans was notably low-key.

Most remarkable has been the scant coverage of the trial by the *New York Times*, which has provided only the most perfunctory news reportage and has yet to make an editorial comment. It is inconceivable that the *Times*' near silence is accidental, given the newspaper's close relations with leading policy makers in the US and its well-known connections to prominent Jewish organisations in the US as well as the Israeli government.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently contacted the public relations representative of the *New York Times* to ask for an explanation of the newspaper's editorial silence on the frame-up of the Iranian Jews. The *Times*' spokesperson refused to comment. However, foreign policy aims of both the US and Israel go a considerable distance in providing a plausible explanation. In this connection, it is important to note that the *Times* has for several years been arguing for closer relations with Iran, while maintaining an intransigent stance towards Iraq.

Albright's formal opposition to the World Bank loan notwithstanding, the role played by the Clinton administration in the Shiraz trial has been no less duplicitous than that of Europe's governments. Sections of the US political establishment have for some time complained that a continuation of the policy of boycott and isolation of Tehran foreclosed any possibility of forging a strategic alliance with an oil-rich country of great potential value in furthering US aims in the Middle East. At the same time, US business interests have become increasingly vocal in opposing restraints on their dealings with Tehran that have allowed European and Asian rivals to gain an advantage in exploiting the country's markets, resources and potential supplies of cheap labour.

Last March, Albright announced an end to sanctions on the export of luxury goods from Iran and called for the two countries to "plant the seeds of a new relationship". She explicitly apologised for American support to Iraq in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.

Within days of Albright's speech, dissident Iraqis based in Iran launched a rocket attack on civilian targets in Iraq. Since then there has been an exchange of rocket attacks across the Iran-Iraq border, including a May 13 assault from Iran on one of President Saddam Hussein's palaces in Baghdad. That same month Iraq claimed it repulsed an Iranian air strike on one of its bases. In addition, for two months beginning in April, Iran refused to allow ships carrying contraband Iraqi oil to sail along its coastline beyond the reach of US and United Nations ships enforcing the UN embargo. Iran seized more than a dozen tankers.

The evident efforts of the US to enlist Iran in its economic and military vendetta against Iraq coincides with the general policy of Israel, which has for some time maintained contacts with Iran and sought to use Tehran as a lever against Baghdad.

Further evidence that such considerations of US-Israeli *realpolitik* underlie the silence on Iran's anti-Jewish show trial is provided by the attitude of leaders of American Jewish organisations with the closest ties to both the US State Department and the Israeli regime. Recently Rabbi Avi Weiss, president of the Coalition for Jewish Concerns, complained that a May vigil held in New York to protest the Shiraz trial was "sabotaged" by top Jewish officials. Participants in the vigil charged that the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organisations had advised Jewish groups not to attend, on the grounds that they preferred "quiet" diplomatic negotiations with Iran.

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