

International issues in the Iranian crisis

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President Obama's declaration, in his June 23 press conference, that he was "appalled and outraged" by the Iranian government's reaction to protests over Iran's presidential election results represents an escalation of US pressure on the clerical regime in Tehran. This direct statement, which he suggested was motivated by pressure from Republican Senator John McCain and more right-wing sections of the US bourgeoisie, was welcomed in the US media as the renewal of a more aggressive stance towards Iran.

In the first two weeks after the Iranian election, the White House left the bulk of the propaganda campaign in favor of defeated candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi to the media. As is now clear, however, Obama's initially muted rhetoric was more a question of tactics than of substance.

Numerous US analysts are writing that the Iranian regime of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has been decisively destabilized by post-election demonstrations. There are reports of conflicts and purges in the security services, as well as the arrest of the daughters of reformist kingpin Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, as the factions of the Iranian bourgeoisie compete for political and economic advantage.

US business intelligence service Stratfor writes: "Ahmadinejad's second term will see even greater infighting among the rival conservative factions that constitute the political establishment.... Iran will find it harder to achieve the internal unity necessary to complicate US policy."

The shift in Obama's rhetoric signals a move to exploit to the fullest the divisions emerging in the Iranian ruling elite. To significantly shift, let alone change, the regime in Tehran would be seen as US imperialism's biggest foreign policy triumph since the collapse of the USSR and the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe.

For US imperialism, as well as its European allies, huge interests are at stake in the outcome of the Iranian crisis. Indeed, the intensity of the media propaganda campaign is the truest gauge of the extent of the interests—geo-political and financial—that are involved. This is an "aspect" of the Iranian crisis that the publications and organizations of the middle-class left—hopelessly gullible and stupid—take no notice of.

In considering the global implications of the Iranian events, it is worth reviewing a bit of history. Since the end of World War II, Iran has played a central role in the foreign policy of the

United States. One of the first major conflicts to arise between the USSR and the US in the post-war period concerned the presence of Soviet troops in northern Iran. The Soviet Union chose to withdraw its forces rather than risk an armed collision with the US (backed by Britain).

The subsequent radicalization of the Iranian working class, the growing power of the local Tudeh (Communist) party, and demands for the nationalization of oil resources led to the infamous US-organized coup against the democratically elected government of Premier Mohammed Mossadegh. The Shah Reza Pahlavi, reinstalled on the "Peacock Throne" by the Central Intelligence Agency, looked after American interests in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East for the next quarter century. His regime was sustained by a ruthless security force, SAVAK, which tortured and murdered its opponents.

The relationship between the United States and the Shah's regime was of the greatest strategic significance, a geo-political fact to which none other than Dr. Henry Kissinger testified at length in the first volume of his memoirs, *White House Years*. Composed in the aftermath of the Shah's humiliating overthrow, Kissinger's tribute to Reza Pahlavi reflected the former secretary of state's bitterness over the consequences of the Iranian Revolution:

Under the Shah's leadership, the land bridge between Asia and Europe, so often the hinge of world history, was pro-American and pro-West without any challenge. Alone among the countries of the region—Israel aside—Iran made friendship with the United States the starting point of its foreign policy.... Iran's influence was always on our side; its resources reinforced ours even in some distant enterprises—in aiding South Vietnam at the time of the 1973 Paris agreement, helping Western Europe in its economic crisis in the 1970s, supporting moderates in Africa against Soviet-Cuban encroachment, supporting President Sadat in the later Middle Eastern diplomacy. In the 1973 Middle East war, for example, Iran was the *only* country bordering the Soviet Union not to permit the Soviets use of its airspace—in contrast to several NATO allies. The Shah absorbed the energies of radical Arab neighbors to prevent them from threatening the moderate regimes in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Persian Gulf. He refueled our fleets without question. He never used his control of oil to bring political pressure; he never joined any oil embargo against the West or Israel. Iran under the Shah, in short, was one of

America's best, most important, and most loyal friends in the world (Boston: 1979, p. 1262).

The 1979 Revolution and the emergence of a nationalist regime profoundly changed strategic relations in the Middle East and Central Asia, to the disadvantage of the US and—it must be added—Iraq. The United States responded to the loss of its Persian Gulf “gendarme” by encouraging Iraq, ruled by Saddam Hussein (who was made, as required, a US ally), to invade Iran. During the 1980s, the attitude of the US to Iran was deeply hostile, in as much as Iranian influence frequently undermined American initiatives in the Middle East. However, the complexity of Middle Eastern, Persian Gulf and global politics complicated US-Iranian relations, with the United States occasionally seeking a limited degree of accommodation with Tehran. But the relations, in the main, remained hostile.

In 1988, the United States Navy, in a particularly vindictive act, shot down an Iranian passenger jet over the Persian Gulf (the Vincennes Affair), resulting in the death of 252 Iranians (plus 38 non-Iranians). This crime played a significant role in the Iranian regime’s decision to end the Iran-Iraq War on terms favorable to Iraq.

There were (and are) many points of conflict between the nationalist regime in Tehran and the United States. The appeal of Iranian-style Shiite populism threatened the Sunni rulers of Shiite-majority areas in the southern Persian Gulf, such as Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia’s oil-rich Eastern Province. The regime refused to allow US military installations in Iran, depriving the US of valuable military bases and listening posts directed north into the USSR. More recently, Iran emerged as a major backer of Islamist opponents of Israel, such as Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Iran’s nuclear program has angered the United States—which believes that the acquisition of a nuclear weapon would enhance Tehran’s regional prestige—and frightened Israel, which views a nuclear Iran as an “existential threat.”

US-Iranian relations have global as well as regional implications. Iran has developed diplomatic ties and purchased substantial military equipment from Russia and China, which Washington now views as major strategic competitors. With its huge energy reserves and strategic location, it is the most natural destination for pipelines from China or India to the Middle East, as well as a potential rival of Russia as Europe’s main supplier of natural gas.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush administration escalated US-Iran tensions, denouncing the Tehran regime along with Iraq and North Korea as part of the so-called “Axis of Evil.” That leading figures in the Bush administration advocated war against Iran was well known. However, the subsequent military disasters in Iraq and Afghanistan rendered such plans unviable.

Concurrent with a reconsideration of US policy in relation to Iran—that is, how to develop a longer-term policy for reestablishing US influence over Iran—factions of the Iranian political establishment began indicating to Washington that

they were interested in closer collaboration. By opposing Sunni-extremist Taliban forces in Afghanistan and isolating Sadrist forces opposing the US occupation of Iraq, Tehran has helped limit the US occupation forces’ casualties.

However, despite these gestures on the part of the Iranian regime, it cannot satisfy the strategic aims of the United States without surrendering its own nationalist aspirations. The United States, in the final analysis, seeks the restoration of the sort of relationship it enjoyed with Iran prior to 1979. It wants a puppet regime in Iran.

Within the Iranian ruling elite, the question of relations with the United States looms large in internal conflicts. Those factions, associated with Mousavi, who favor the rapid reorganization of the Iranian economy on the basis of global market principles—in the interests of the wealthiest sections of the population—are prepared, in accordance with the logic of their program, to make substantial concessions to the United States. This is what has won them the support of the United States in the recent election and the resulting power struggle.

Whatever its immediate results in Iran, the crisis has created significant political instability, which Washington hopes to manipulate to its advantage. The competing factions of the Iranian bourgeoisie will tend more and more openly to strengthen their internal position by seeking accommodation with Washington. The only social force that can resist such a neo-colonial settlement in Iran is the working class.

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