

US threatens war while considering talks with Syria, Iran

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Following Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's statement that he is open to talks with the United States on Iran's nuclear program, the American press is discussing a broad regional diplomatic settlement to the war drive Washington and its allies unleashed against Syria, Iran's main Arab ally.

Welcoming a "quick turn of fortunes, as diplomatic options open up with Syria and Iran," the *New York Times* cited a "senior American diplomat" who called the shift "head-spinning."

US officials are preparing a possible meeting between Rouhani and President Barack Obama at the UN General Assembly next week, after Rouhani vowed Iran would never seek to build nuclear weapons. They are also monitoring the initial steps in Syria's program to destroy its chemical weapons.

On Thursday, Syrian officials submitted a list of their chemical weapons to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague, beginning a \$1 billion effort to turn over and destroy Syrian chemical weapons stocks. They are also preparing to revive negotiations between Syria, Syrian opposition forces and the Western powers to be held in Geneva.

The vast stakes involved in US negotiations with Iran and Syria make very clear that the US war drive against Syria concerned far more than the unsubstantiated claim peddled by Washington that Syria had used poison gas in an attack on Ghouta on August 21. This was a pretext to drag the American and European people into an imperialist war against not only Syria, but ultimately also against Iran and possibly Russia, without disclosing the war's far-reaching objectives.

Iran is signaling its readiness to offer guarantees that it will not build a nuclear bomb in return for a relaxation of US sanctions on Iranian oil exports that

have devastated its economy. Inflation is running at 40 percent in many districts, and unemployment has soared as Iranian factories have closed, their access to world markets cut by Washington's isolation of Iran from the SWIFT global financial transactions system. Iranian car production has fallen 30 percent.

The Iranian bourgeois regime is making clear its desire to strike a deal with the US, in no small part because it fears the eruption of open opposition to its policies from the Iranian working class. In exchange, Washington is preparing to demand bone-crunching concessions targeting the heart of Iran's economy, its oil industry, which would transform the foreign policy of the Iranian state and shift its economic policies far to the right.

"Iranians are desperate for relief from sanctions that have cut their oil revenue by more than half, crashed their currency, and made international banking all but impossible, but they may not understand the price of relief. 'I suspect they are heading for sticker shock,' one official deeply involved in developing the American negotiating strategy said recently," the *Times* wrote.

US and European officials and oil companies are carefully studying Rouhani's nomination of Bijan Zanganeh, seen as a pro-Western figure, as oil minister. Zanganeh signed extensive contracts with Western oil firms during his previous stint as oil minister, in 1997-2005, and was fired for corruption by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad when the latter took office in 2005.

Iranian oil analysts cited by the *Economist* said that under Zanganeh, the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) would be more likely to sign production-sharing agreements with Western oil firms, massively boosting their share of Iranian oil revenues. This would

not only slash the funding available for social spending within Iran, but also undermine the funding of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Zanganeh is reportedly engaged in a bitter faction struggle with the IRGC inside Iran's oil industry.

The IRGC, which operates several engineering firms active in the Iranian oil industry, also oversees Iran's military assistance to allied forces in the Middle East, such as the Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah and pro-Iranian, Shia-led regimes in Syria and Iraq.

The head of the IRGC's Quds Force, Major General Ghassem Soleimani, reportedly leads Iran's military effort inside Syria in support of President Bashar al-Assad against the Al Qaeda-linked opposition forces backed by Washington. He has publicly stated that the Quds Force will support Syria "to the end."

Washington and its allies aim to plunder Iran's oil and secure the main goal of the US war in Syria: smashing an incipient Iran-Iraq-Syria-Lebanon axis that it sees as a key obstacle to untrammelled US imperialist domination of the Middle East and a threat to the Israeli state.

This underscores that Obama's packaging of his Syrian war plans as a few brief strikes carried out in retaliation for alleged Syrian chemical attacks was a lie. The strikes on Syria were to be the opening shots in a large-scale regional war, potentially involving Russia, which now maintains extensive naval forces off the Syrian coast.

Such a war has not been called off, but merely postponed. While the Obama administration and its allies temporarily retreated in the face of massive popular opposition and threats from Iran and Russia, their negotiations are a means of pursuing the same war aims through other means.

Obama administration officials are openly stating that they view the continued threat of war as essential to imposing their demands. "You don't achieve diplomatic progress in the Middle East without significant pressure. In Syria, it was the serious threat of military action; in Iran, it was a sanctions regime built up over five years," said US Deputy National Security Advisor Benjamin Rhodes.

Top US analysts, including Patrick Clawson of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), are arguing that new negotiations with Iran, carried out under the threat of war, are the last chance for a

negotiated settlement.

"The moment of truth is coming. All the optics from Tehran—even from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—indicate that Iran is gearing up for another attempt at a nuclear deal. If a deal can't be made in the next few months, it's hard to see another opportunity when the chances would ever be this good again," Clawson wrote in *Foreign Policy*.

The Obama administration has consistently indicated that if it cannot reach a peaceful settlement with Iran—i.e., one entirely on US terms—it will go to war to destroy Iran's capacity to build a nuclear bomb.

US and French officials are at the same time pursuing policies in Syria that will undermine any attempt to seriously negotiate a settlement of the Syrian war in Geneva. The US-backed Islamist opposition militias inside Syria, which desperately sought US military intervention to stave off defeat on the battlefield, have declared that they will boycott the Geneva talks. Nonetheless, Western officials are continuing to step up their military and financial support to the Al Qaeda-linked Syrian opposition.

After US officials declared they would directly arm opposition forces last week, French President François Hollande pledged to arm Syrian opposition forces while visiting the French-occupied West African country of Mali on Thursday. He also announced plans to step up French intelligence collaboration with Syrian opposition forces, offering to train them at bases in Jordan.



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