

Iranian president appeals at UN for deal with Washington

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The speech by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to the UN General Assembly on Tuesday is another clear sign that Tehran is seeking a deal with the Obama administration over its nuclear programs, hoping to end the US-led economic blockade of Iran.

Rouhani and Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif have been conducting a diplomatic offensive at this week's UN General Assembly meeting, holding a round of meetings with senior UN and European officials aimed at restarting stalled international talks on Iran's nuclear program. Zarif is due to meet today with foreign ministers of the P5+1 group (the US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany) that will include American secretary of state John Kerry.

Rouhani's speech set the parameters for any negotiations. He reiterated that "nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction have no place in Iran's security and defence doctrine" but added that his government was willing to "remove any and all reasonable concerns about Iran's peaceful nuclear program."

At the same time, the Iranian president insisted that there had to be "acceptance of and respect for the implementation of the right to [uranium] enrichment inside Iran." Alluding to US-led sanctions and military threats, he warned that it would be "extremely unrealistic" to impede Iran's nuclear program "via illegitimate pressures." He offered to "engage immediately in time-bound and result-oriented talks to build mutual confidence and [the] removal of mutual uncertainties with full transparency."

Rouhani also hinted at the possibility of a broader rapprochement with Washington. After referring to Obama's speech made just hours before, he said: "Commensurate with the political will of the leadership

of the United States and hoping that they will refrain from following the short-sighted interest of warmongering pressure groups, we can arrive at a framework to manage our differences."

The Iranian regime is desperate to end the punitive sanctions that have crippled the country's economy and threaten to trigger social unrest. Unilateral US and European sanctions on Iran's key energy industry have halved its oil exports, which government finances heavily depend upon, and largely blocked Iran's access to the international banking and finance system. The Iranian currency has lost more than half its value over the past year, sending inflation soaring to more than 40 percent, including on a broad range of food and other essential items affecting working people.

Rouhani appears to be acting with the backing of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the ultimate say over the country's foreign and strategic policies. Rouhani was formally installed last month, after winning presidential elections in June with the support of key figures from the so-called reformist faction of the ruling elite—former presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammed Khatami.

Significantly, Rouhani's ministerial choices were approved virtually unopposed by the Iranian parliament last month, after reportedly being given the green light by Khamenei. The installation of Zarif as foreign minister and Bijan Zanganeh as oil minister are particularly significant. Along with Rouhani, both held key positions under President Khatami between 1997 and 2005 as he sought to strike a deal with the US to open up the country to foreign investment, including in the oil industry.

Zarif, who was educated in the US, served as Iran's UN ambassador between 2002 and 2007 and was centrally involved in Khatami's efforts in 2003 to reach

a “grand bargain” with the US, which the Bush administration ignored. He was also involved in secret deals with Washington in 2001 and 2003 that gave Iranian assistance for the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Stratfor analyst Kamran Bokhari told *Bloomberg*: “It was under Zarif’s tenure as ambassador to the UN that the US and Iran cooperated behind the scenes on the toppling of the [Iraqi] Saddam government.”

Rouhani is constrained in negotiations with the US, not only by the regime’s hardline or “principalist” faction, but by far broader anti-imperialist sentiments among working people who are acutely conscious of the long history of predatory American interventions in the Middle East. While the tone of Rouhani’s speech differed from that of his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, he was no less critical of US militarism and aggression.

While not naming the US, Rouhani declared that “those who harp about the so-called threat of Iran are either a threat against international peace and security themselves or promote such a threat.” He referred in particular to “Saddam Hussein’s imposed war on Iran” in the 1980s that was backed by Washington, the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the support given by the US and its allies to Al Qaeda-linked militias in Syria that are fighting to oust President Bashar al-Assad, Iran’s ally.

Rouhani has also made clear that he only has a limited time for negotiations. He was the chief negotiator in talks over Iran’s nuclear program with Washington’s European allies, during which Iran shut down its uranium enrichment program between 2003 and 2005 only to be offered virtually nothing in return. In an interview this week with the *Washington Post*, he declared: “The only way forward is for a timeline to be inserted into the negotiations that’s short—and wrap it up ... The shorter it is the more beneficial it is to everyone. If it’s three months that would be Iran’s choice, if it’s six months that’s still good. It’s a question of months, not years.”

The Obama administration, however, has no intention of making major concessions to the Iranian regime, which it regards as an obstacle to unfettered US domination of the Middle East and Central Asia. In the P5+1 talks to date, the US and its allies have continued to insist that Iran must ultimately dismantle all of its

enrichment facilities, which Tehran is determined to maintain. Washington is undoubtedly looking for access to the lucrative Iranian oil and gas industries, from which it has been excluded since breaking diplomatic and economic relations with Iran in 1979.

The US also wants Iranian assistance to engineer regime-change in Syria. While Rouhani declined a meaningless photo op with Obama, he did meet with French President Francois Hollande on Tuesday. Hollande pressed the Iranian president for concessions on Syria and Iran’s nuclear program. The French leader reportedly pressed Rouhani to scale back Iran’s support for President Assad and to accept terms of the “Geneva 2” conference, through which the US and its allies are seeking to engineer Assad’s removal. France has been a bellicose supporter of a US military attack on Syria.

As it has done in previous negotiations, the Obama administration will seek to exploit talks with Iran to extract whatever concessions it can, while offering little or nothing in return and continuing its efforts at regime change in Tehran.



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