

Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei issues caution on moves for US-Iran talks

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Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has publicly endorsed Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's attempt to reach an accommodation with Washington, including his recent diplomatic offensive at the UN General Assembly meeting in New York.

Khamenei also issued a caution, however, suggesting Rouhani had overreached when he had taken a phone call from US President Obama and warning that Washington has a long record of duplicity and arrogance. The 15-minute, September 27 Rouhani-Obama phone call was the first time that the heads of government of Iran and the US have spoken since the bloody US-backed regime of Shah Reza Pahlavi was overthrown by the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

US imperialism has never reconciled itself to this defeat. For the past 34 years, it has waged an unrelenting campaign aimed ultimately at returning the Iranian people to the type of neo-colonial subjugation they endured under the Shah.

Under Obama, this campaign has reached a new intensity. Using their dominance of the world financial system, the US and its European allies have imposed punishing sanctions on Iran aimed at cutting off its oil exports and other trade, so as to strangle its economy. Moreover, Washington has repeatedly threatened to wage war on Iran if it does not agree to give up its rights as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to peacefully enrich uranium. This is despite Tehran's repeated affirmations that it has no intention of developing nuclear weapons and the admission of US intelligence agencies they have no proof Iran is seeking to develop them.

Three days after speaking with Rouhani, Obama stood next to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has called Rouhani a "wolf in sheep's clothing," and again threatened to order a US attack on Iran. "We take no options off the table," he declared, "including the military

option."

Khamenei, speaking Saturday to an audience of military officers and cadets, said, "We support the government's diplomatic drive, including the New York trip, because we trust [Rouhani's] administration ... and we are optimistic about [the drive]."

"But some of what happened in the New York trip was not appropriate," he added. "The American government is untrustworthy, arrogant, illogical and a promise-breaker."

Khamenei did not elaborate on his "not appropriate" remark, but it was clearly a reference to Rouhani's conversation with Obama, which has been the subject of considerable debate in the Iranian press and among Iranian political leaders.

In an editorial criticizing Rouhani for having spoken with Obama, *Kayhan*, an influential paper associated with the Principlist faction of Iran's political elite, asked: "If it was a decent act, why does neither side accept the responsibility [for having placed the call]?"

Some reports claim it was Rouhani who requested Obama call him, because he believed this "breakthrough" could be used to demonstrate that his overture to the US was bringing dividends.

The most significant of the critical comments, prior to those of Khamenei himself, were those made last week by the head of the Revolutionary Guards, General Mohammad Ali Jafari. While praising Rouhani's New York trip, Jafari called the president's interaction with Obama a "mistake." He "would have been better off," said Jafari, "avoiding the telephone conversation with Obama ... and [leaving] such measures until after practical, verifiable steps by the US government."

Rouhani's critics from inside the Iranian ruling elite have noted that the US continues to strangle the Iranian economy and has given every indication that there will be no relaxation, let alone repeal, of the sanctions regime until Iran has made major concessions to Washington.

Indeed, the US is threatening to impose further sanctions aimed at eliminating all Iranian oil exports by 2015 and denying it the capacity to use the euro in its foreign trade. In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week, the US lead negotiator with Iran, US Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman, said the Obama administration will urge Congress to speedily adopt still harsher sanctions unless Tehran makes proposals to Washington's liking next week. On October 15 and 16, Iranian diplomats are to meet with the representatives of the P-6 (the US, Britain, France, Russia, China, and Germany) to discuss Iran's nuclear program.

Responding to Khamenei's criticism, Rouhani thanked him for supporting his government's overtures to Washington, then affirmed that in following this path, his administration "will tread based on national interests and the Leader's guidelines."

Khamenei is seeking to balance between rival factions of the bourgeoisie, clerical political elite, and military-security apparatus. But in recent years the divisions have greatly intensified, amid the global economic crisis and an unrelenting US campaign to subvert Iran. Iran's economy contracted more than 5 percent last year, inflation is above 40 percent, and the government recently warned unemployment could rise from 5 to 8 million. (Iran's total population is 80 million.)

At the center of the divisions within Iran's bourgeois elite have been Iran's relations with Washington and apprehensions over the popular opposition to cuts to the remains of the social concessions made to the working class and the rural poor immediately after the 1979 Revolution.

Khamenei's criticisms of Rouhani are an attempt to maintain the fragile unity of Iran's political establishment while he uses the new government—which is dominated by a faction of the elite around former President Rafsanjani, from which he became increasingly estranged in recent years—to explore a rapprochement with US imperialism.

While Rouhani and those around him in government have made clear that they are not only eager for a deal with Washington but believe one can be quickly negotiated, Khamenei has himself expressed skepticism and counseled caution.

This is no doubt in part because of previous experience. Iran, with the Supreme Leader's support, has repeatedly made overtures to Washington only to be rebuffed. Tehran tacitly supported the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

Washington responded in the first instance by declaring Iran to be part of the "axis of evil" and in the second by launching its campaign to bully and threaten Iran over the nuclear issue.

While Rouhani spent the past months preparing his "diplomatic offensive" in New York, the Revolutionary Guards have been assisting Syria in fighting against the US-backed Islamist rebels in what is transparently a campaign for regime change orchestrated by Washington and its regional allies, with the primary aim of isolating and weakening Iran.

The Rouhani-Rafsanjani faction has been the most fervent advocate of pro-market "reform." They conceive of the restructuring of the economy at the expense of the working class and the drive for rapprochement with the US as two planks of the same class strategy.

On Sunday, Iran's deputy oil minister Mansour Moazzam announced that the new government has launched negotiations with transnational oil and gas companies. "The Oil Ministry and the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) have no problem with American oil companies," he declared. "There are no restrictions for foreign partnership in [Iran's] petroleum industry."

And on Monday, Iran's Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance, Ali Tayyeb-Nia, issued a call for sweeping changes to Iran's economy, claiming for emphasis that sanctions were only partially responsible for Iran's economic crisis.

The real problems, said Tayyeb-Nia, are the excessive use of oil revenues in the state budget (i.e. for supporting public services and social programs), the lack of "fiscal discipline," an insufficiently large and state-supported "private sector" and unfavorable terms for investors, including foreign investors.



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