In run-up to nuclear talks

Iranians protest en masse against US aggression

Keith Jones
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Hundreds of thousands of Iranians joined a demonstration in Tehran Monday to mark the 34th anniversary of the 1979 occupation of the United States embassy by students opposed to the US government's decision to allow the deposed Shah—for decades the head of a savage Washington-backed dictatorship—to live in America.

The officially-sanctioned commemoration became the occasion for a show of strength by sections of the Islamic Republic's clerical-bourgeois elite that are wary of the new government's attempted rapprochement with the US.

With the blessing of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khamenei, President Hassan Rouhani's administration has signaled its readiness to make major concessions to the US and its European Union allies in return for the removal of punishing economic sanctions.

In the first instance these concessions concern Iran's civilian nuclear program, which the US and Israel have long alleged, without providing any evidence, is a cover for the development of nuclear weapons.

The Rouhani government has declared its eagerness to throw open Iran's economy to US and European investment, including the possibility of accessing the country's plentiful oil and natural gas reserves at concessionary rates. And it has indicated that, in return for the US renouncing its decades-long campaign to overthrow the Islamic Republic, Iran would be a willing partner of Washington in maintaining stability in the Middle East and Central Asia.

On the eve of Monday's demonstration, Khamenei reiterated his support for Rouhani's overtures to Washington. "No one," he declared, "should consider our negotiators as compromisers. They are our children and children of the revolution [that toppled the Shah]. They have a difficult mission, and no one must weaken an official who is doing his job."

While Iran's Supreme Leader prescribed limits to any public show of concern about the Rouhani administration's foreign policy, he declared that he was "not optimistic" that the negotiations with Washington would result in an agreement. Drawing attention to the continuing threats from the Obama administration and Israel of a military strike on Iran, Khamenei declared: "The Americans smile and express desire for negotiation; on the other hand, they immediately say that all options are on the table."

According to numerous Iranian sources, including the Fars News Agency, Monday's commemoration of what is officially known in Iran as the "National Day of Resistance Against Global Arrogance" was the biggest ever. In addition to the demonstration in Tehran, there were hundreds of smaller rallies in cities and towns across the country.

Important sections of the clerical-political elite and military-security establishments mobilized support for the November 4 commemoration as a means of serving notice to the Rouhani administration of their concerns. These have been accentuated by the secrecy that surrounds both the administration's one-on-one discussions with Washington and the offer it made to the P-6 (the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany) at last month's talks in Geneva about Iran's nuclear program.

The Basij, a pro-government volunteer militia, mobilized tens of thousands of its members. High school and university students were given the day off. But the large turnout was also a product of the deep-rooted popular anger over US imperialism's neo-colonial subjugation of the Iranian people under the Shah and its unrelenting aggression since his overthrow in 1979. The sanctions imposed since 2010 have had a devastating impact, halving Iran's oil exports, helping drive inflation to 40 percent and joblessness to 5 million, and depriving hundreds of thousands—especially cancer patients—of the medicine and treatments they urgently require.

In recent weeks, supporters of the Rouhani government indicated considerable nervousness about the efforts of their elite factional opponents to appeal to anti-US sentiment. Billboards that were meant to draw attention to US duplicity

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in its relations with Iran—one showed a US negotiator dressed in a suit and tie while wearing battle fatigues beneath the negotiating table—were taken down. Hashemi Rafsanjani, Rouhani's political mentor and a former Iranian president who for more than two decades has advocated a rapprochement with US imperialism, led a public campaign for the Islamic Republic to rescind its populist-nationalist "Death to the US" rally cry.

Ultimately several of Rouhani's ministers attended Monday's demonstration, which culminated at the former US embassy in Tehran. Prominent anti-US "hardliners" insisted that the show of opposition to the US government was meant to support Rouhani and his administration in their dealings with Washington. Gholam-Ali Haddad Adel, a prominent Principalist, told Fars news agency: "This massive presence of the people in the demonstration strengthens the negotiation team. With this show of force our diplomats will carry out their tasks in a better way."

Declarations by student organizations that participated in the rallies drew attention to the recent statements of Obama administration officials that Washington will not withdraw or even relax the sanctions against Iran until Tehran satisfies all its demands concerning the nuclear program.

The main speaker at the Tehran rally was Saeed Jalili. A former Iranian nuclear negotiator, Jalili finished a distant third in last June's presidential election.

He defended the "Death to America" slogan, saying it incarnated opposition to great-power arrogance or *Estekbar*—a Koranic word revived by the regime as a substitute for the Farsi word for imperialism, which was viewed as problematic because of its Marxist connotations. "'Death to America'," said Jalili, "is death to the grandiosity and humiliation of nations… 'Death to America' is not against the American people; it is against the 1 percent that has oppressed not only all other nations, but also its own people."

Pointing to the recent revelations of blanket US National Security Agency (NSA) spying, including from US diplomatic missions, Jalili noted that the students who occupied the US embassy in 1979, and took its American personnel hostage, termed it a "nest of spies." Khamenei made a similar observation in his speech of the day before, saying, "Our youth called the US embassy the spying nest 30 years ago, and now other countries are coming to our position."

With negotiations between Iran and the P-6 set to resume in Geneva for two days at the end of this week, the Obama administration has sought to reassure both its allies in the Middle East and the US Congress that its "diplomatic turn" represents no change in its drive to bring Iran to heel.

In an Israeli television interview broadcast Sunday night, Wendy Sherman, the US's chief negotiator at the P-6 talks, declared: "We have not offered any sanctions relief on Iran, and we have not removed any sanctions." Sherman pledged that Israel's vehemently anti-Iranian government would be consulted on any deal with Tehran, "because Israel's security is bedrock, and there is no closer security relationship than what we have with each other."

US Secretary of State John Kerry travelled to Riyadh Monday, to pledge Washington's steadfast support for the ultra-reactionary Saudi monarchy, which, like Israel, has long been pressing Washington to attack Iran because it fears Tehran's growing influence in the region. Kerry anointed Saudi Arabia "the senior player" among Arab states, called it an "indispensable" US partner, and pledged continuing US support for the Saudi-armed, Islamacist-dominated forces seeking to overthrow the Syrian government, Iran's closest regional ally.

The Obama administration has also been trying to placate a powerful faction of the political elite in Washington that wants to impose crippling new sanctions on Iran, including an outright ban on oil exports by 2015. While a number of Senators have reportedly agreed to a 60-day moratorium in exchange for an administration pledge not to remove any sanctions or allow Iran any access to its frozen assets during those 60 days, several Senate leaders declared themselves unconvinced.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman, Democrat Robert Menendez, told the *Jerusalem Post* he had not heard "sufficient, substantive reasons to delay" acting on further sanctions past this week's talks in Geneva **.**

The administration's fear is that the immediate imposition of further sanctions would be such a flagrant show of bad faith that it would force the Iranian government to withdraw from the nuclear talks and cause other countries to waver, if not drop their support for the sanctions.

The differences in the Washington elite are, as the administration itself has been at pains to demonstrate, merely over tactics. All factions are determined to extort massive concessions from Iran and, if successful, would seek to exploit such concessions to impose regime change.

The US-Iranian "opening" could collapse even more abruptly than it began, raising the imminent danger of a war that could rapidly envelop the region, if not the world.

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