

Iranian president declares country “open for business”

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Iranian President Hassan Rouhani travelled to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland last week in order to woo the world financial elite and reiterate the Islamic Republic’s eagerness to reach an accommodation with US imperialism.

Rouhani was accompanied by Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, and Energy Minister Bijan Zanganeh.

In a Thursday address, press interviews, and a series of closed door meetings with western leaders and businessmen—including the heads of Europe’s oil giants—Rouhani said Iran seeks “constructive engagement” with all countries and “is ready to welcome entrepreneurs and big economic companies.”

He hailed the “new engagement” between Iran and the US, telling a Swiss television station “we have to turn animosities to friendship.” In an interview with Euronews, Rouhani said that the “foundations” have been laid for the revival of Iran’s “very important traditional and historical relations” with Europe.

Rouhani travelled to Davos little more than 48 hours after a six-month interim agreement between Iran and the P-6 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany) came into force. Under that agreement, Iran has made sweeping concessions to the US and its European Union allies, freezing and rolling back its civilian nuclear program, in exchange for what the White House has boasted is “limited, targeted and reversible” sanctions relief.

Over the next six months, Iran is to be granted staggered access to \$4.2 billion of its own money, currently frozen in foreign banks, and allowed to engage in trade involving petrochemicals, precious metals and auto parts. This will provide Iran with an estimated \$7 billion in sanctions relief—equal to what the punitive US and EU sanctions are costing Iran every six weeks just in foregone oil exports.

Rouhani used his Davos visit to emphasize Iran’s eagerness to reach a final settlement of the nuclear

issue—which is unthinkable without an Iranian rapprochement with US imperialism.

For over a decade, Washington, under Republican and Democratic administrations alike, has used fabricated and unsubstantiated claims about Iran’s nuclear ambitions as a means of isolating and bullying Tehran and laying the political groundwork for a war for regime change.

“The Iranian will” for a settlement with the P-6 is “serious” and “strong,” declared Rouhani. He repeated Tehran’s longstanding commitment not to seek nuclear weapons and emphasized that Iran views the interim nuclear agreement as “a prelude to future agreements and engagement” that go far beyond “a specific issue.”

These are code-words for harnessing Tehran to US’s imperialism’s strategic interests in the broader Middle East, from Afghanistan to Lebanon. In recent months Tehran has repeatedly stressed that it is willing to help Washington stabilize the Middle East, pointing to the role it played in assisting the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan and the installation of Hamid Karzai as its puppet president.

Rouhani was even more explicit in offering concessions to the European and US oil giants. He told a meeting of European oil executives that by next September the government plans to have in place a much more attractive regime for foreign investors in Iran’s energy sector.

Top executives of BP, Total, Shell and Eni were reportedly enthused by the presentation given them by Rouhani and Iranian Energy Minister Zanganeh, who presided over a rapid expansion of European investment in Iran’s oil industry when he held the same post in the 1990s.

“Iran wants to open up to international oil companies,” Paolo Scaroni, the head of Italy’s Eni, told Reuters. “It was an impressive presentation,” said another of the oil executives in attendance.

The US-EU sanctions have roiled Iran’s economy,

which was already shaken by the sharp fall in oil prices caused by the 2008-9 world financial crash and slump. Since 2011, Iran's oil exports, which fund most of the state budget, have been halved, and inflation and unemployment have soared.

Fearing an explosion of working class opposition, the Iranian bourgeoisie and its clerical political elite are seeking to forge a new alliance with US imperialism and its European allies. Toward this end, the reins of power have been given over to a so-called "national unity" government, that includes figures identified with the regime's "reformist" and conservative Principalist wings, but is led by a faction formed by Rouhani and his political mentor, former President Hashemi Rafsanjani.

The Rouhani-Rafsanjani faction has long spearheaded the drive for a rapprochement with Washington and for the elimination of what remains of the social concessions made to the working class and poor in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Revolution that toppled the bloody dictatorship of the US-backed Shah.

Important light on the connection between the regime's turn toward Washington and its plans to restructure the Iranian economy is shed by a 2010 book authored by Rouhani. *National Security and Economic System of Iran* lauds the neo-liberal policies pursued by European and North American governments and denounces Iran's "very oppressive" labour laws. The book argues that the minimum wage must be slashed and restrictions on the laying off of workers eliminated if Iran's "owners of capital" are to have the "freedom" to create prosperity. "One of the main challenges that employers and our factories face," Rohani wrote, "is the existence of labour unions. Workers should be more pliant toward the demands of job-creators."

While the Iranian bourgeoisie is offering Washington its services in stabilizing the Middle East and in profiting off the rapacious exploitation of Iran's resources and working class, the Obama administration is making clear that it seeks nothing less than Tehran's abject surrender.

Last Monday, the very day that the interim agreement came into force, the US forced the United Nations to rescind an invitation to Iran to attend the international conference on a political settlement to the Syrian war. The US insisted on Iran's exclusion because it refused to accept Washington's demand that it agree in advance that the conference's purpose should be to organize the replacement of Syria's Baathist regime, its close ally, by a transitional government in which the US's Islamacist "rebel" proxies would have half of the seats.

Then on Thursday, US Secretary of State John Kerry threatened Iran with war, saying that if Iran were to resume uranium enrichment above 5 percent "the military option that is available to the United States is ready and is prepared to do what it would have to do." Kerry went on to denounce Iran as a "state sponsor of terrorism" and demanded Iran "stop supporting" the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah "completely and totally."

The following day, in his own address to the Davos World Economic Forum, Kerry spelled out a series of demands that are in flagrant contradiction with Iran's rights, as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to a full-cycle civilian nuclear program. These included the demand that Iran dismantle its nearly-completed Arak plutonium reactor. Kerry, in a move patterned after the demands Washington made of Saddam Hussein in the run-up to the US's launching of its illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq, said it is up to Tehran to prove that its nuclear program is solely for peaceful purposes and that Iran is in full compliance with all UN Security Council resolutions, including US-crafted resolutions that seek to legalize Iran's ballistic missile program.

In response to Rouhani's Davos appearance, the US also sought to emphasize its determination to enforce the punishing sanctions it and the EU have imposed on Iran, including those that freeze it out of the world banking system and target its oil exports.

"Our message to all companies is the same" said US Treasury Department Under Secretary David Cohen, "Iran is not open for business. ... Now is not the time to re-engage with Iran." To underscore the point, the Treasury Department announced that it has forced a subsidiary of Germany's Deutsche Borse securities exchange to pay a \$152 million penalty for helping Iran circumvent US financial sanctions.



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