Growing unease in Iran over rapprochement with Washington

Keith Jones
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Serious differences within Iran's ruling elite over the attempted rapprochement with Washington have been repeatedly voiced over the past week, one that has been full of official commemorations of the February 1979 overthrow of Shah Reza Pahlavi's US-backed dictatorship.

These differences express not only the divergent interests of rival factions within the Iranian ruling elite. They also reflect, albeit in distorted form, deep-rooted popular concerns over the regime's overtures to the United States, which for three and a half decades has been threatening Iran with war, and since 2011 has led its European Union allies in battering Iran with across-the-board economic sanctions. The US-EU sanctions have crippled Iran's economy and caused tens of thousands of deaths by denying Iranians access to pharmaceuticals and medical equipment.

The conflicts within the Islamic Republic's bourgeois-clerical establishment have undoubtedly been sharpened by the intensified pressure Washington has placed on Iran since a six-month interim nuclear agreement between Iran and the P-6 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany) came into force last month.

As part of a renewed drive to oust the Baathist regime in Syria, Iran's closest governmental ally, the US excluded Iran from the Geneva II conference on Syria. And it has moved aggressively to uphold the sanctions that have halved Iran's oil exports since 2011 and frozen the country out of the world banking system, vowing—in direct contradiction to the claims of Iran's president—that "Iran is *not* open for business."

On Tuesday, millions of Iranians joined demonstrations to mark the 35th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution. According to press reports, many of the demonstrators carried placards that read, "We are eager for all options on the table." This was meant as a show of defiance of US President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry, who have repeatedly declared that if Iran does not dismantle its civilian nuclear program "all options are on the table"—that is, the US stands ready to attack Iran.

Just three days after the interim nuclear accord went into effect, ostensibly marking the beginning of a new phase in US-Iranian relations, Kerry declared that should the interim deal collapse or expire without a permanent agreement, "the military option of the United States is ready and prepared to do what it would have to do."

The placards however carried a second message. They were an implicit rebuke of the current Iranian government, since two of the figures most identified with it—Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president and the political mentor of the current president, Hassan Rouhani—have publicly declared that Iran would be incapable of mounting any meaningful resistance to a US attack.

In his address to the main rally held in Tehran, President Rouhani reaffirmed his government's readiness to pursue a permanent settlement of the nuclear issue with the P-6. Iran's rulers know full well that such an agreement would require huge concessions to US strategic interests in the Middle East and granting the US energy giants privileged access to Iran's oil and natural gas riches.

But Rouhani could not ignore the US war threats, declaring that "those delusional people who say the military option is on the table… should change their glasses. Threats against Iran are worthless and childish."

"Unity and resistance against foreign colonialism," continued Iran's president, "made the Iranian nation victorious."

In the days preceding Tuesday's commemoration of the February 11, 1979 collapse of the Shah's regime, leaders of Iran's military and Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) repeatedly issued statements warning about US imperialist aggression and double-dealing, and affirming the readiness of Iran to repel any foreign attack.

The head of the IRGC, Major-General Mohammad Ali Jafari, did not directly criticize the interim nuclear agreement under which Iran has rolled back and frozen its civilian nuclear program in exchange for receiving a tiny portion of its own money frozen in the world banking system. But, in what can only be interpreted as a veiled

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criticism, he said, “It must be asked why some are willing to easily sell Iran’s dignity and strength at the cost of removing hostilities with America.”

Several, including the Revolutionary Guards aerospace commander, General Zadeh, cited the example of the Libyan regime of Muammar Gadaffi, which dismantled its nuclear program, welcomed Western investment and supported US strategic interests in the Middle East, only to become the target of a successful US-NATO “regime-change” war.

On Monday, Iran’s Defence Ministry announced the successful staging of tests of long-range, laser-guided surface-to-surface and air-to-surface ballistic missiles. The tests were clearly meant as an answer to the US, which has signalled it intends to force Iran to dismantle its ballistic missile program as part of any permanent resolution of the nuclear issue.

Washington is trumpeting a UN Security Council resolution, signed onto by Russia and China, that declared Iran should cease the development of ballistic weapons on the grounds they could be used as a nuclear weapon delivery system. No matter that Iran has foresworn nuclear weapons and the US and its allies have never provided any substantive proof that Tehran is seeking them.

In his major address marking the 35th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, delivered last Saturday, Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, warned that if it could, the US “would not hesitate even for a moment” to “change the regime of Iran.” Khamenei chastised unnamed “individuals” who “want to the change the people’s opinion about the enmity of the enemy.” He then went on to urge all Iranians to support the Rouhani government in its efforts to reach a permanent settlement with the US and its EU allies. Declaring that the government should be given time to implement its program, Khamenei instructed the government’s critics “to pay attention to this point and…behave towards the administration with equanimity.”

Khamenei, who plays a Bonapartist role within Iran’s faction-ridden clerical, political and military establishments, has repeatedly voiced skepticism about US intentions, even as he publicly proclaims his support for the overtures to Washington and pulls strings in support of the government behind the scenes.

Several of his most trenchant anti-US speeches have directly preceded significant Iranian concessions to Washington.

On Sunday, Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency announced a seven-point agreement under which Tehran will grant the IAEA greater access to Iranian nuclear facilities, including a uranium mine and laser center. For the first time, Tehran has agreed to provide information and an explanation for its work on a detonation trigger that the US and Israel have charged was meant to trigger a nuclear device. Also last week, a leading Iranian official suggested that Tehran might be willing to make significant changes to the design of the unfinished Arak heavy-water plutonium reactor, transforming it to light-water.

The day after Khamenei’s speech, the IRGC issued a press release reaffirming its support for the interim nuclear accord and praising the government’s reply to the recent US threats. “The diplomatic apparatus has met the aspirations of every single Iranian,” declared the statement, “by responding explicitly, firmly and transparently to the nonsense of the front of the enemies.”

Rouhani, for his part, has expressed alarm over the extent of the opposition to his government. Last week he denounced those openly opposing the interim nuclear accord, which includes a minority faction within the Iranian parliament, as “illiterates.” Speaking at a meeting of academics, he implored them to speak out in the government’s support.

Two events earlier this month shed light on the profound social crisis and fear of an explosion of opposition within the working class that underlie the Iranian bourgeoisie’s turn toward an accommodation with Washington.

A government scheme to distribute food baskets to those earning less than $170 per month stoked mass anger. This was both because of the long line-ups and waits—a consequence of the massive numbers of people who qualified for and needed the support—and the poor quality of the food. Three people died as a result of waiting for hours in extreme cold.

There have been mass protests in Iran’s Yazd Province in support of 28 workers and union leaders who were arrested as authorities sought to break a strike by 3,000 workers at the Chadormalu iron mining complex. The workers had gone on strike to demand the reinstatement of a worker fired as the result of a previous walkout in December, and to press for pay increases to make up for Iran’s near 40 percent inflation rate as well as the payment of four months’ outstanding overtime pay.

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