

Iranian regime cautiously embraces international nuclear deal

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Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, yesterday sounded a note of caution over the nuclear framework agreement reached last week with the P5+1 grouping—the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany. While declaring that he was “100 percent” supportive of a nuclear accord, he added, “there is still no guarantee of reaching the finishing line.”

Iranian negotiators led by Foreign Minister Javad Zarif made sweeping concessions during the protracted negotiations, agreeing to strict limits on uranium enrichment, the refashioning of an uncompleted heavy water reactor and highly intrusive inspections for unspecified sanctions relief. A final agreement is due to be completed by June 30.

Over the past week, significant sections of Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime have praised Zarif and hailed the agreement as an important breakthrough that could end the crippling US-led sanctions regime. In a nationally televised speech last Friday, President Hassan Rouhani, who initiated the negotiations, declared that the deal “benefits everyone” and would open a “new page” in the country's international relations.

Last Sunday, Iran's armed forces chief, General Hassan Firouzabadi, wrote to Khamenei thanking Rouhani for his actions in this “sensitive area” and the supreme leader for his “guidance” in the nuclear negotiations. On Monday, the parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani, a former chief nuclear negotiator, said the deal was a “good sign” and expressed the hope that the negotiations would “prepare the ground for economic prosperity.”

On Tuesday, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, the top Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) commander, thanked “these dear negotiators” for their “honest attempts” and resistance to the US on key “red line”

issues. Jafari's comments are particularly significant. The IRGC has been a bastion of hard-line opposition to any concessions to the US and its allies, and is closely aligned with the supreme leader.

Khamenei's cautionary comments yesterday came after a week of silence that allowed the government to sell the deal. As supreme leader, he has the final say in foreign and defence policy but is compelled to balance between the various factions within the regime. Having given the green light for the talks to proceed, Khamenei did not denounce the major concessions made by negotiators. Rather he insisted that the final agreement include an immediate end to all sanctions and the exclusion of military facilities from international inspections.

No timetable for ending sanctions has been decided. The US is insisting that any sanctions relief will only occur after Iran implements Washington's demands to wind back its nuclear programs. Moreover, the Obama administration has maintained that the sanctions will not be lifted, only suspended, allowing for them to be “snapped back” into operation on any pretext.

For Iran, however, lifting the sanctions that have devastated the country's economy is the top priority. “[The] sanctions should be completely lifted on the first day of the agreement, otherwise why would we have been negotiating?” Khamenei exclaimed. Warning against US duplicity, he said: “The whole problem comes now [to] the details that should be discussed, because the other side is stubborn, difficult to deal with, breaks promises and is a backstabber.”

Undoubtedly Khamenei's comments are aimed at placating more hard-line elements of the regime that have been critical of aspects of the agreement, as well as signalling to Iran's negotiators that significant sanctions relief is critical to the acceptance of any final

deal. Last Friday, Hossein Shariatmadari, editor of the conservative *Kayhan* newspaper, complained about the agreement: “We should say that we gave a saddled horse and received a torn bridle [in return].”

Significantly, however, public criticism has been largely limited to the terms of the agreement. No prominent figure is calling for an end to the talks. A further indication that a political shift is underway was the official response to a group of several protesters who gathered outside the parliament on Tuesday to voice their opposition to the agreement. Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli warned that “illegal gatherings” would not be allowed in the future.

While an agreement might not yet eventuate, the willingness of the regime to cut a deal with Washington underscores its thoroughly bourgeois character. For all the anti-American posturing and ritualised chants of “Death to America,” the clerical ruling elites that emerged from the 1979 revolution are not opposed to imperialism as such, but rather have been seeking an adjustment in their relations with the US and other major powers.

Iran’s economy has been hammered by US-led sanctions. Oil exports have halved since 2012 to about 1 million barrels a day and the economic impact, including on government revenues, has been compounded by falling international prices. Iran has been largely cut off from the international banking and financial system, blocking access to an estimated \$100 billion in oil revenues. Foreign investment has virtually ground to a halt. The economy contracted sharply in 2012 and 2013, with minimal growth subsequently.

Sections of business and the upper middle classes are backing the nuclear deal as a means to ending the economic blockade and opening up commercial opportunities and career prospects. Rouzbeh Pirouz, a fund manager, enthusiastically told the *New York Times*: “There now is the potential of lots of foreign investment coming into the country. These are very exciting times.”

At the same time, the Iranian bourgeoisie as a whole is petrified that the country’s deep economic and social crisis will fuel political unrest among the working class and the urban and rural poor. Rampant inflation has been accompanied by high levels of unemployment, especially among young people—a quarter of whom are officially jobless. While inflation has fallen from more

than 40 percent in 2012 to 17 percent, the price rises for basic food staples have been far higher and affect the poorest social layers. An estimated 40 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. In December and January, auto workers and teachers took industrial action to demand higher wages.

President Rouhani and his government have attempted to promote the nuclear agreement as a means of reviving the Iranian economy and lifting living standards. However, far from ending the social crisis, the ending of economic sanctions will only intensify the demands for further pro-market restructuring and deeper inroads into the social position of the working class. Like President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s previous administration, the current government has already bowed to International Monetary Fund demands for the slashing of price subsidies, hitting working people hard. Whatever the final outcome of the talks, the assault on the social conditions of the working class will only intensify.



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