

Iran signals closer collaboration with West

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Having reached an agreement on Tuesday with the P-6—the US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany—over its nuclear programs, the Iranian government is already signalling that it could be open to closer collaboration with the West, economically and diplomatically.

In a message marking the end of Ramadan, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, the lead Iranian negotiator, boasted of diplomatic success and declared that “the atmosphere is now quite ripe for [the] broadening of regional and international cooperation.” Earlier this month, he indicated that a nuclear deal would “open new horizons” for collaborating in “the fight against extremism”—a reference to the US-led war against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militias.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani made a similar suggestion in a phone call with British Prime Minister David Cameron on Thursday, saying, as reported by the Iranian Republican News Agency (IRNA), that extremist groups were “active in the entire region and playing with fire.” Cameron’s office stated that the prime minister had expressed the hope that the nuclear agreement would mark a fresh start to relations between Britain and Iran and indicated that the discussion had included Iraq and the civil war in Yemen.

Rouhani, who won the 2013 presidential election, is closely associated with former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie who have long pushed for a rapprochement with the US and Europe to end the punishing sanctions regime and to open up for foreign investment.

The nuclear agreement reached this week known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) places extensive restrictions on, and monitoring of, all aspects of Iran’s nuclear program in return for the removal of sanctions over time.

Some of the sanctions on the import and export of arms and missile technology will remain in place for

five and eight years respectively. A “snap-back” clause enabling the rapid re-imposition of sanctions if Iran is deemed in non-compliance effectively gives Washington the whip-hand over the agreement’s implementation.

The sanctions, which froze more than \$100 billion in Iranian reserves held in foreign accounts and halved oil exports, will only begin to be removed after Iran taken steps to wind back its nuclear programs—a process that could take six months or more.

In Iran, the agreement has still to be ratified by the country’s parliament where it is likely to face opposition from hard-line factions of the political establishment. Zarif is due to brief the parliament next Tuesday. It also requires the approval of the Supreme National Security Council.

A great deal will hinge on the attitude taken by Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the ultimate say over foreign affairs and military matters.

In a letter to Rouhani on Wednesday, Khamenei described the JCPOA as a “milestone” and declared that he would “pray for divine blessing” for Iran’s negotiators. He also said that the agreement required “careful scrutiny” and warned that, if accepted, Iran had to be careful of violations as some of the major powers “are not trustworthy at all.”

Khamenei’s comments should be taken with a grain of salt as he seeks to balance between rival factions of the regime. The negotiations would not have started, let alone proceeded, without the support of the supreme leader. Khamenei’s call for “careful scrutiny” is mainly designed to blunt opposition from within his own base of support among so-called conservatives.

To date, criticism of the negotiators and the agreement has been relatively muted. An editorial in the conservative *Kayhan* newspaper declared on Wednesday that the deal was “not promising” and that the gap between its contents and Iranian demands was

“very big and inexcusable.”

Prominent hardliners held a press conference in Tehran on Thursday. However, rather than denouncing the agreement outright, they indicated that they would follow Khamenei’s advice and examine its 159 pages in detail to see if it breached “red lines” laid down by the supreme leader in a statement in June.

One of the organisers, Alireza Mataji, stated: “We quickly realised that what we feared all the time had become a reality. If Iran agrees with this, our nuclear industry will be handcuffed for many years to come.” The conservative factions rest on layers of the state apparatus, such as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp, and the ruling elites that have managed to expand their influence and business under the economic blockade and are more oriented to Russia and China.

The position of these layers has, however, been significantly eroded by the country’s worsening economic crisis as a result of the crippling sanctions and fears throughout the regime of social unrest in the working class being triggered by widespread unemployment and poverty. Significant sections of Iranian business are already positioning themselves for the reopening of trade and an inflow of foreign investment.

American and European corporations are cautiously sounding out the possibility of investing in Iran drawn by the prospect of lucrative opportunities, especially in the oil and gas industry, which desperately needs new capital. Last month, the country’s transport minister said that Iran would be in the market to buy up to 400 commercial aircraft over the next 10 years, at the cost of at least \$20 billion.

Far from easing social tensions, the opening up of the Iranian economy will only deepen the gulf between rich and poor. Rouhani’s orientation to the West is bound up with an agenda of economic restructuring that will put an end to what remains of the limited social gains of the 1979 revolution in Iran.

However, all factions of the political establishment are committed to imposing new burdens on working people. Previous President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad imposed massive cutbacks to price subsidies, which have been extended by Rouhani along with privatisations. Estimates of unemployment are as high as 20 percent, affecting young people in particular, and inflation has hit the poorest layers of the population

hard.

Far from opening up a bright economic future, the nuclear agreement is likely to lead to further social and political turmoil.



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