

A reply to a proponent of “Iranian Islamic socialism”

The struggle against imperialism and for workers’ power in Iran—Part 3

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This is the conclusion of a three-part series in reply to Iran Press TV journalist Ramin Mazaheri’s criticisms of the WWS’s coverage of, and support for, the recent explosion of working-class anger against Iran’s bourgeois-clerical regime. Part 1 was posted February 14 and Part 2 February 15.

The Islamic Republic and Imperialism

Mazaheri takes great exception to our insistence that Iran’s foreign policy is not anti-imperialist. Tehran, in keeping with the class nature of the Islamic Republic, pursues a nationalist foreign policy, directed at expanding the strategic influence and wealth of the Iranian bourgeoisie and, in particular, at realizing its regional-power ambitions.

In our previous reply, we noted, “from the beginning,” the aim of the Islamic Republic’s rulers, “has been to establish greater freedom of action for the Iranian bourgeoisie within world capitalism, including by seeking closer economic ties to European and Japanese imperialism.”

“To be sure, over the past four decades, American imperialism has mounted a relentless drive against Iran, under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, imposing punishing economic sanctions and exerting massive military pressure. But the leaders of the Islamic Republic have made repeated overtures to Washington—far too many to document here.”

In response, Mazaheri declines to offer any serious analysis of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. He merely points to the long record of imperialist hostility toward Iran and says our characterization of Iran’s foreign policy does not conform with how the Islamic Republic is popularly perceived in the region. Those with whom he has interacted, while reporting from the Middle East and North Africa, have “repeatedly” expressed “admiration for Iran’s hard line against American and Zionist imperialism.”

Perhaps. But in an earlier period, Mazaheri would doubtless have encountered many who would have given a similar endorsement of Nasser’s “Arab Socialist” regime, from which Sadat soon emerge, or Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

This is not a new debate. Chiang Kai-Shek was once celebrated by the Stalinists as an “anti-imperialist,” even awarded honorary membership in the Third International.

Moreover, there is a century-long experience with bourgeois national liberation movements and regimes in Asia, Africa and Latin America that posed as “steadfast” in their opposition to imperialism, only to brutally suppress the democratic and social strivings of the masses and reach an accommodation with imperialism.

The bourgeoisie in countries subject to colonial or neo-colonial oppression may come into sharp conflict with imperialism, even wage armed struggle, but it does so, not to overthrow imperialism, but to widen

its own possibilities for class exploitation.

The national bourgeoisie in historically oppressed countries chafes under imperialist bondage. In the interests of rallying mass support and casting itself as the leader of the nation against foreign domination, it may thunder against the imperialists and make certain social concessions, as the Islamic Republic did in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 revolution. But the national bourgeoisie lives in trepidation of a working-class challenge to capitalist property.

“A democratic or national liberation movement,” Trotsky explained, “may offer the bourgeoisie an opportunity to deepen and broaden its possibilities for exploitation. Independent intervention of the proletariat threatens to deprive the bourgeoisie of the possibility to exploit altogether.” [14]

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic has zig-zagged over the past four decades, as it has sought to maneuver among the imperialist powers and surrounding states in a region that, due to its vast oil reserves and geostrategic location as the hinge between Europe, Asia and Africa, has long been a fulcrum of geo-political conflict.

With the US pursuing a hostile policy, officially backing regime change and threatening war, Tehran has pushed back, challenging what the US defines as its strategic interests in the region, particularly in Lebanon, the Occupied Territories/Palestine Authority and, more recently, in Syria.

For decades, however, it has also sought, and much of the time enjoyed, close economic and diplomatic ties to Europe and Japan.

Just as Mossadegh hoped to gain American support in challenging the region’s traditional dominant imperialist power, Britain, so the Islamic Republic has tried to offset pressure from Washington by courting Berlin, London, Paris and Brussels. Mazaheri dismisses this, even as the current Iranian government has redrafted the country’s oil concession and royalty laws to please European corporations such as Total, BP, Eni, etc.

In evaluating a state, government, or “liberation” movement, it is necessary to consider its relations with imperialism as a whole, not just those with one particularly rapacious or regionally powerful imperialist adversary.

Even in regards to the “Great Satan,” US imperialism, Tehran has repeatedly signaled it would be ready to effect a rapprochement, if Washington would abandon its efforts at regime change and accept the Islamic Republic as a junior partner in stabilizing the Middle East.

As previously mentioned, beginning in the late 1980s, and in the name of post-Iran-Iraq War reconstruction, the Islamic Republic mounted a social offensive against the working class, adopting the neo-liberal policy prescriptions of the IMF and World Bank. This went hand in hand with a push to redefine its relations with world imperialism. Declaring Iran “open for business,” Tehran solicited foreign investment, dropped its hostile attitude toward the Gulf states, which had financed Iraq’s war with

Iran, and sought rapprochement with Europe and the US.

Tehran officially adopted a pose of “positive neutrality” during the 1991 Gulf War. However, as Mahmoud Vaezi, Iran’s deputy foreign minister at the time, explained, this “in reality meant that it was a policy *against* Iraq” (emphasis in the original). [15] Iran even allowed the US Air Force to use its air space.

In the war’s aftermath, a US-Iran rapprochement was negotiated, with President Rafsanjani fulfilling a key American condition by delivering a speech renouncing “terrorism.” However, President George H. W. Bush feared that an agreement with a country the US government and media had long vilified might adversely impact his 1992 re-election campaign, so he scotched it.

In 1995, Rafsanjani attempted to strike a similar deal with Clinton, throwing into the pot a \$1 billion oil contract with Conoco to operate two fields.

In the fall of 2001, Tehran provided important logistical support to the US invasion of Afghanistan, then played a major role at the Bonn conference in December 2001 in rallying support for the US choice for puppet Afghan president, Hamid Karzai. Tehran hoped this would smooth the way for wider cooperation. Instead, George W. Bush denounced Iran in his January 2002 State of the Union address as part of “an axis of evil,” along with Iraq and North Korea.

Nevertheless, Tehran resumed negotiations and intelligence sharing with the US later that year, as Washington geared up for the invasion of Iraq—an invasion that would leave Iran with US armies occupying its western and north-eastern neighbours, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Just weeks after US troops entered Baghdad, Supreme Leader Khamenei authorized a secret “grand bargain” offer to Washington. In exchange for the US renouncing regime-change, Tehran offered to subordinate itself to US strategic interests across-the-board, including by officially recognizing Israel, cutting off support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and pressuring Hezbollah to disarm and integrate itself into the Lebanese political order. In line with this, Iran, which had, and continues to have, extensive ties to Iraq through Shia religious and tribal networks, urged Iraqi Shias to cooperate with the US occupation administration.

But Tehran’s “grand bargain” was rejected. Puffed by hubris, George W. Bush, Cheney and the other war criminals atop the US administration calculated Tehran would be even more amenable to their threats once US control over Iraq was consolidated, and the Pentagon’s longstanding and newly-updated plans for war with Iran could be set in motion.

Mazaheri would no doubt defend these maneuvers, as he does the Iran nuclear deal and the regime’s post-1988 pursuit of pro-market, socio-economic policies and reconciliation with imperialism, by appealing to pragmatic necessity—what else could and can the Islamic Republic do?

But these policies are not anti-imperialist. They are the actions of a bourgeois regime desperately trying to maneuver in the face of rising social contradictions within Iran and mounting pressure from American imperialism, which has sought to offset its declining world position by unleashing a wave of predatory violence in the Middle East, to shore up its dominance of the world’s most important oil-exporting region.

The only viable basis for opposing imperialism is the revolutionary mobilization of the workers and toilers of Iran and the Middle East, based on an appeal to their democratic and social strivings. Such a strategy must be tied to a strategic orientation to the working class of the US and the other imperialist powers.

It is not that the policies of the Islamic Republic are simply insufficient or inadequate. They strengthen imperialism, as underscored by Tehran’s complicity in the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Incapable of making a genuine appeal to the class interests of the workers and toilers of the Middle East, the Islamic Republic seeks to win popular support in the region through sectarian appeals for Shia solidarity. Such a policy can only alienate Sunni workers and youth, and those of

other faiths, and assist imperialism and its local client regimes in whipping up sectarian conflict.

Under the cover of the need for “national unity” against imperialism, the Iranian bourgeoisie strives to strengthen its position against the working class.

Take the “hostage crisis,” which at its height was proclaimed by Khomeini’s supporters to constitute a “second revolution.” Genuine and justified fears of US intrigue and aggression, heightened by President Jimmy Carter’s provocative decision to allow the deposed Shah to enter the US, led to the student takeover of the American embassy in November 1979, amid an outpouring of popular support. But Khomeini and the newly-founded Islamic Republican Party subsequently manipulated the “hostage crisis” to brandish their anti-imperialist credentials, the better to consolidate their rule. They used it to effectively preempt public debate on the constitution enshrining an exalted political status for the Shia clergy, and to accuse anyone who criticized the Islamic revolutionary authorities of weakening Iran in its confrontation with America.

Ultimately, the regime cut a secret deal with emissaries of Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan to refuse to release the hostages prior to the 1980 US election, thereby helping his campaign. It also abandoned most of Iran’s demands, including for the return of the vast sums the Shah had looted from the Iranian people.

Mazaheri objects to our reference to the ruinous 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War. But it was a seminal experience that underlines the reactionary character of the regime’s continuous calls for national unity, and the class interests that animate its foreign policy. Saddam Hussein attacked Iran in September 1980 with the aim of seizing territory and securing the patronage of US imperialism. But the Islamic Republic continued the war after liberating all its own territory in mid-1982, rejecting Saddam Hussein’s offers of a truce, and invading and occupying parts of Iraq. For a further six years, Iran was effectively on the offensive, perpetuating the war, while the imperialists fanned the flames, providing arms to both sides. The mullahs waged war with Iraq for a double purpose: to channel the social anger and frustration that emerged in Iran against an external enemy, as the emancipatory aspirations of the masses were dashed, and to realize the Iranian bourgeoisie’s longstanding ambitions to establish itself as the regional power.

As the International Committee of the Fourth International explained in a June 1986 statement, “This barbarous war is the starkest proof of the inability of the Iranian and Iraqi bourgeoisies to win real independence from imperialism. Instead they are competing for the title of strongman of the Gulf so as to be in the best position to strike a deal with imperialism. In effect, each is trying to get six inches taller by sticking its boot on the throat of the other.”

Ultimately, under conditions where Washington was providing ever greater military assistance to the embattled Iraqi regime and threatening to use the war as a pretext to intervene directly in the region, Khomeini abandoned Tehran’s demands for massive reparations and other concessions from Baghdad, and reluctantly agreed to end the war.

In putting faith in the Islamic Republic’s rhetorical “anti-imperialism,” Mazaheri is deceiving himself.

Washington, for its part, is keenly aware of the deep factional fissures within the Iranian bourgeoisie and the Islamic Republic’s clerical political establishment, and the fact that Iran-US relations are a major cause of these cleavages.

US support for the Iran nuclear deal and for a pullback from a headlong confrontation with the Islamic Republic and the Iranian people was based on the calculation that the expansion of US-Iranian relations, including commercial ties, would enable it to probe and leverage the fissures within the Iranian elite and, over time, change its strategic orientation.

The Green Movement was not just a product of imperialist intrigue and manipulation. It enjoyed widespread support within the Iranian

bourgeoisie and the Islamic Republic's clerical-political establishment. This was exemplified by the support extended to it by Rafsanjani, the billionaire cleric who effectively ruled Iran in a duopoly with Khamenei from 1989 to 1997.

The WSWS opposed the attempt to use the Green Movement to shift the Islamic Republic's foreign and domestic politics far to the right. But our opposition in no way implied support for Ahmadinejad or Khamenei, let alone any confidence that they would not, themselves, seek an accommodation with US imperialism at a future date. "Ahmadinejad's anti-American posturing," declared the WSWS Perspective of June 17, 2009, "has nothing to do with any genuine anti-imperialist struggle, but is aimed at pressuring Washington for a more advantageous accommodation to the interests of the Iranian bourgeoisie. His ... stance as 'a man of the people' sympathetic to the poor, cannot obscure the fact that the social divide has only deepened under his administration."

Four years on, and with Rafsanjani's longtime protégé Hasan Rouhani installed as president, Khamenei authorized yet another shift in Iran's foreign policy, toward rapprochement with Washington. This ultimately led to the Iran nuclear accord, which came into force in January 2016.

With the Trump administration moving to scuttle the Iran nuclear accord, Tehran is now placing its bets on the European imperialist powers constraining the US and, if necessary, defying Washington's reimposition of all-out sanctions.

This is a high-risk gamble. Led by Germany, the European imperialist powers are rearming and moving to assert their own predatory interests, independently of, and, when the need arises, against Washington. But even if they think Trump's policy toward Tehran foolhardy and detrimental to their interests in the Middle East, are they ready to imperil their trade and military-security relations with the US over Iran? Since the lifting of European sanctions in January 2016, numerous European political and business leaders have scouted investment opportunities in Iran, some even inking deals. Yet European investment has thus far only trickled into Iran, because of fears of running afoul of future belligerent action by Washington.

Even were differences between the US and Europe to provide the Islamic Republic with a respite, undoubtedly it would be bound up with further "enticements" from Tehran to European investors—economic enticements whose burden would be borne, first and foremost, by the working class.

Tehran's maneuvers in Syria and Iraq are similarly shot through with contradictions. In addition to Russia, Iran is now working with Turkey, on the basis of their mutual hostility to the Kurds, although Ankara earlier played a major role in the US-orchestrated campaign to oust the Iranian-backed regime in Syria.

Ali Shariati, Islamic socialism, and the blind alley of "national" socialism

The "Iranian Islamic socialism" that Mazaheri espouses is a strand of the Iranian nationalism, laced with Shia populism, which the bourgeoisie used to cloak its class aims during the anti-imperialist upsurge of 1978 to 1981. Although successive governments have, as Mazaheri himself concedes, pursued neo-liberal policies, a minority faction of the Islamic Republic's political establishment continues to promote Islamic socialism, because it provides the regime with a "left" face under conditions of mounting social crisis and opposition.

Mazaheri asserts, "Iran's economic decisions have clearly been primarily based on Islamic morals and obviously socialist ideology."

In reality, socio-economic life in Iran manifestly revolves around, and is subordinated to, the class interests of the bourgeoisie—the maintenance and expansion of its wealth, profits, and influence.

Are the burdens of Iran's confrontation with US imperialism borne "equally," or do they fall disproportionately on the working class and rural toilers? To ask the question is to answer it.

Islamic socialism is a sham. The working class has no say in the organization of economic and social life in the Islamic Republic, and no independent organs of political power.

The defence of wealth as a "gift of God" and of private property's role in turning the "wheels of the economy"—essential Islamic precepts, according to no less than Ayatollah Khomeini, the acknowledged founder of the Islamic Republic—are utterly incompatible with socialism, i.e., with collective ownership and democratic control of the key economic levers of society. So, too, is the privileged political position of the Shia clergy.

Much of Mazaheri's second blog is devoted to criticizing a brief reference to the "Islamic socialist" Ali Shariati in our reply. In doing so, he misconstrues our intent. Mazaheri suggests that the WSWS somehow prefers Shariati—who, while he bitterly opposed Marxism, identified himself with the "left" and espoused "Red Shiism"—to the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Our purpose, rather, was to draw attention to how aware and troubled Khomeini was by the influence and appeal of socialism among the working people and students of Iran. A virulent anti-Communist, long-associated with the political right, Khomeini himself never used the term "Islamic socialism." But he clearly drew on the writings of Shariati, and other advocates of a fusion of socialism with Islam, when he recast Shia Islamic theology in the early 1970s, in order to broaden the popular appeal of the clerical-bourgeois opposition to the Shah and more effectively combat the left.

The historian Ervand Abrahamian has noted that, prior to the 1970s, Khomeini seldom used the term *mostafazin*, and when he did it was to denote the "weak" not the "oppressed masses." The latter use of *mostafazin* had been popularized by Shariati when he translated Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. [16]

This brings us to a second point; and, lest Mazaheri be concerned, we should state for the record that this has nothing to do with "appropriating" Shariati for the West, but is, rather, aimed at situating Islamic socialism in its broader political and intellectual context.

A devout Muslim from a clerical family, Shariati studied in Paris in the late 1950s and early 1960s. While there, he participated in the Algerian independence struggle and became familiar with many of the attempts to develop an "indigenized" Arab and African "socialism." A major influence was Amar Ouzegane, a one-time leader of the Stalinist Algerian Communist party, who became a major figure in the Algerian FLN and argued in his *Le meilleur combat* that Islam was a revolutionary ideology compatible with socialism and a more effective means than Marxism for mobilizing the masses.

Mazaheri, as we have previously noted, emphasizes that "European socialism" must be tailored to "national tastes" in Iran and other predominantly Muslim countries.

There were, in fact, numerous attempts to develop "national" socialisms in the era of post-World War II decolonization and national liberation struggles. They reflected the strivings and contradictory class position of the colonial bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. These privileged layers, who were resentful of and angered by the indignities and limits on their wealth and power that imperialism inflicted on them, recognized the utility of socialist rhetoric in rallying mass support to win independence, but were fearful of any challenge from the working class.

The most left-wing representatives of this tendency were influenced and even, to some extent, attracted by Marxism, but they reinterpreted it according to their own class interests and national ambitions.

Many, for a time, sought the patronage of the Soviet, and to a lesser extent, the Chinese Stalinist bureaucracies, as a means of counteracting imperialist pressure and solidifying support from the local Stalinist party.

In the Stalinist two-stage "theory" of revolution, they found a program compatible with their class needs, for it legitimizes the leadership of the bourgeoisie in the national-democratic struggle against imperialism and

relegates the struggle for socialism to the distant future.

The 1960s and 1970s were the heyday of such “national paths” to socialism.

In Asia, Africa and Latin America, numerous regimes emerged that claimed to be building their own unique national variant of socialism. These included, to name but a few of the best known, those of Nkrumah in Ghana, the Congress Party in India, and Sukarno in Indonesia.

In the Middle East and North Africa, there were manifold proponents of “Arab socialism,” from the Algerian FLN, Egypt’s Nasser and the rival Iraqi and Syrian wings of the Ba’ath Party, to the “Islamic socialist” Muammar Gaddafi.

Despite their “anti-imperialist” pretensions, these were bourgeois nationalist regimes. They used socialist phrases to rally support from the workers and rural masses, while pursuing state-led economic development, including import substitution and state ownership, aimed at offsetting the pressure of imperialism and promoting indigenous industrialization.

Their ability to posture as socialist was intimately bound up with the politics of Stalinism and the Cold War. The Soviet Union offered them aid, markets and military-strategic support. The local Communist parties, meanwhile, politically smothered the working class, enjoining it to support the “anti-imperialist” wing of the bourgeoisie.

These regimes were unable to resolve any of the essential democratic and social problems involved in overcoming the legacy of colonial oppression and winning genuine independence from imperialism, let alone to “build socialism.” Invariably they turned to brutal repression when confronted by a challenge from the working class. Under conditions of mounting imperialist pressure and domestic class conflict, some quickly made their peace with imperialism (e.g., Egypt), others were overthrown (Indonesia). And some secured imperialist patronage, only to find themselves the target of regime-change operations and wars when the geopolitical situation turned. Such was the fate of both Saddam Hussein and Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi.

The Soviet and Chinese Stalinist bureaucracies’ renunciation of the autarchic program of “socialism in one country” in favor of capitalist restoration and the demise of the era of “radical” bourgeois—or, in their parlance, “national socialist”—regimes in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, are parallel processes. The globalization of capitalist production fatally undermined all programs, regimes and organizations that sought to counter imperialist pressure through national economic regulation.

For a revolutionary party of the Iranian working class

A quarter century after the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union, world capitalism is manifestly in its deepest crisis since the economic and geopolitical convulsions of the Great Depression, which climaxed in the second imperialist world war.

All of the imperialist, great, and aspiring regional powers are rearming, as Washington baldly asserts that the world has entered a new area of “great power competition.” The revival of militarism goes hand in hand with a universal assault on the social and democratic rights of the working class.

The illegal wars of aggression Washington has waged in the Middle East since 1991 have failed to reverse the decline in the world position of American imperialism. By shattering the reactionary state-system that British and French imperialism imposed on the region at the end of the First World War, they have, instead, initiated the bloody re-partition of the region now under way.

Given the Mideast’s oil wealth and its geographic importance to strategic dominance over Eurasia, Africa and the Indian Ocean, the outcome of this repartition is pivotal, not only to the strategic position and fortunes of all the region’s states, from Israel and Saudi Arabia to Turkey and Qatar. More importantly and explosively, it is crucial to all the world’s major powers, from the US, Japan and Germany, to China and

Russia.

The Islamic Republic is caught in this maelstrom of global economic and geopolitical crisis. The Iranian bourgeoisie’s room to maneuver among the major powers, and to balance between imperialism and the working class, is rapidly disappearing.

The Iranian bourgeoisie has no way out of this maelstrom. Or, rather, its ways out—those that correspond to its basic class interests—are inimical to the interests of the working class and toilers of Iran and of the region, and weaken the struggle against imperialism; whether they take the form of intensified exploitation of the working class; maneuvers and deals with the imperialist powers, including Washington; or military actions in Syria and elsewhere, which, even if largely of a defensive character, only further embroil the region in war and sectarian conflict.

Writing in the 1930s, as capitalism again hurtled toward the abyss of world war, Trotsky called on the international working class to base its strategy, not on the war map of the rival capitalist powers, jockeying for markets, resources and colonies, but on the map of the class struggle.

The working class in Iran must emerge as an independent political force and rally the rural poor and other oppressed behind it, in opposition to imperialism and the capitalist regime born of the abortion of Iran’s 1979 anti-imperialist revolution.

It must consciously strive to unite its struggles with those of Arab, Turkish, Kurdish and Jewish workers in the fight for a Socialist United States of the Middle East, and appeal to workers in the US and other advanced capitalist countries to join in the building of a global movement against war and imperialism.

The fight for this strategy requires the building of a revolutionary party based on the struggle of the Fourth International, today led by the International Committee (ICFI), to defend and develop the program of permanent revolution, through the systematic assimilation of the lessons of the great strategic experiences of the working class in the 20th century. These include the tragic outcome of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which demonstrated, in the negative, the decisive importance of a revolutionary—that is a Marxist—perspective, program and leadership.

The WSW and ICFI will lend every assistance to Iranian workers, youth and socialist-minded professionals and intellectuals ready to take this road of struggle.

Concluded

Footnotes

[14] Leon Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin* (London: New Park, 1974) p. 131.

[15] As cited in Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the US* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) p. 142.

[16] Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) p. 47.



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