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Why Did the U.S. and Iran Make a Deal?

Imposing Washington's Terms

by ASHLEY SMITH

DECEMBER 11, 2013

The five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, along with Germany, signed an interim agreement with Iran at the end of November to temporarily freeze Iran's nuclear program in exchange for limited relaxation of international sanctions. The agreement will last for the next six months while the parties attempt to negotiate a final agreement with Iran.

News of the agreement sent shock waves through the Middle East. "No matter what you think of it, this is a historic deal," Vali Nasr, dean of the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, told the *New York Times*. "It is a major seismic shift in the region. It rearranges the entire chessboard."

A bipartisan host of American foreign policy apparatchiks, from Madeleine Albright to Zbigniew Brzezinski to Brent Scowcroft, celebrated the pact as an example of how imperialist sanctions and coercive diplomacy, backed by the threat of military strikes, can secure U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Iran's new President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif likewise extolled the agreement, contending that it represents a victory for Iran. They claim that they got

the U.S. to tacitly recognize Iran's right to enrich uranium for its civilian nuclear power program. Zarif declared the deal was an "opportunity to end an unnecessary crisis and open new horizons based on respect, based on the rights of the Iranian people, and removing any doubts about the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program."

Not surprisingly after years of Israeli provocations directed at Iran, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu denounced the pact as "historic mistake." Economy Minister Naftali Bennett ranted, "If in five years, a nuclear suitcase explodes in New York or Madrid, it will be because of the deal that was signed this morning."

Similarly, sections of the elite in Saudi Arabia, Washington's closest Arab ally, condemned the deal. One commentator, Tariq Alhomayed, who is close to the country's policy-makers, said that "Obama had sold the region, abandoning the U.S.'s historic alliance with Gulf"—and that the agreement was "more dangerous than 9/11." Similarly, hardline conservatives in Iran expressed outrage with the accord.

While both sides have praised the agreement, it is clearly a victory for U.S. imperialism against Iran.

The U.S. and its allies on the UN Security Council were able to force Iran to stop enrichment of uranium to 20 percent purity, which is closer to weapons-grade; destroy uranium already enriched to this level; and convert its stockpile of uranium at lower levels of purity to forms that cannot be further enriched. Iran also agreed to freeze the development of its heavy water reactor in Arak, which produces plutonium, a component that could be used for an atomic weapon.

The imperialist powers also compelled Iran to accept daily inspections by the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of all its nuclear facilities and laboratories. This would be the most extreme inspection regime imposed on any country in the world.

In exchange, the U.S. and its allies agreed to \$7 billion in financial from sanctions now and in the coming six months. They also have agreed to relax bans on petrochemical exports, automobile trade and production, and student funding.

But the imperialist powers will still maintain most of the sanctions against Iran as leverage to compel further concessions in negotiations on a comprehensive settlement. The ongoing sanctions on oil and natural gas exports cost Iran \$5 billion a month. The imperialist powers will continue to deny Iran access to \$100 billion of frozen assets in international banks.

Many liberal antiwar commentators have supported the agreement as an example of diplomacy as an alternative to war. "This deal is an unprecedented step forward to peacefully resolving the standoff over Iran's nuclear program," wrote Katie Gould of the Friends Committee on National Legislation. "It's time for Congress to support our negotiators to ensure that this deal and the long-term agreement that follows it is a success."

While everyone should be happy that the threat of a catastrophic war with Iran over its nuclear program seems off the table for now, no one should be under any illusions about U.S. diplomacy. This is merely imperialism by other means. “We ought to remember that the U.S. is not reducing tensions to please the international left and progressive and antiwar movements, still less as a concession to the oppressed of the region, but for the sake of imperialist stability,” wrote Michael Karadjis.

With this agreement, the Obama administration is continuing its effort to reorient U.S. imperial strategy to retain its position of global dominance. In the Middle East, the administration has scrapped plans for any regime changes, and has instead adopted a new strategy of striking a balance of power between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey and other states, in an attempt to stabilize the region—with the ultimate goal of turning its attention to the conflict with rising powers such as China.

A key part of this new balance of power will be establishing a new arrangement with Iran, which has been a thorn in the side of the U.S. since the 1979 revolution that toppled the Shah and his brutal regime. Since then, the U.S. has aimed to undermine and overthrow the Islamic regime that took over the revolution and established its rule over the country.

The U.S. has treated Iran’s clerical regime as a threat to its own hegemony over the Middle East. Washington immediately imposed sanctions on the country and then backed Saddam Hussein’s war on Iran in the 1980s. In the 1990s, the U.S. maintained a policy of dual containment of Iraq and Iran, and over the last decade, it cynically used Iran’s nuclear power program as an excuse to continue the conflict.

With almost no evidence, Obama’s predecessors in the Bush administration claimed that Iran was trying to develop nuclear weapons. In fact, as Britain’s former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw recently told the BBC, “There is no evidence, not from the IAEA, not from the Americans...that they are involved in building a bomb.”

The Iranian government says its nuclear program is designed to produce electricity for civilian uses—and as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it is entirely within its rights under international law to continue doing so. While Iran may have flirted with enrichment to use as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the U.S., its Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has issued a religious fatwa banning the production of nuclear weapons and called for a nuclear-free Middle East.

In doing so, Khamenei has exposed America’s hypocrisy on nuclear power and weapons. The U.S. and the rest of the countries involved in negotiations with Iran all have nuclear programs, and all except for Germany have nuclear weapons. The U.S., of course, remains the only country to have ever used these weapons of mass destruction in war, when it incinerated the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The U.S. goal is to protect its monopoly on such weapons, and that of its allies. Operating through the UN, Washington has relentlessly policed Iran's civilian nuclear program—while turning a blind eye to Israel, which has never signed on to the NPT and has developed an estimated 100 nuclear weapons in its stockpile.

In the run-up to the 2003 war on Iraq, the Bush administration used the pretext of irregularities in Iran's disclosure of its nuclear program to target the country as the next target for regime change. As the insiders' joke went at the time, "Everyone wants to go to Baghdad, real men want to go to Teheran." After Iran, the Bush team also planned regime change in Syria—all to remake the Middle East on American terms.

In an attempt to head this off, Iran's reformist government, at the time headed by then-President Mohammad Khatami, proposed an agreement that would have been even more stringent than the one the U.S. just negotiated. Bush rejected the offer and escalated his threat of regime change. In response, Khatami—followed by his successor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—stepped up Iran's enrichment of uranium.

As a result, Iran increased the number of its centrifuges between from a few thousand in 2006 to over 19,000 today. It built up its reserves of enriched uranium to over 9,000 kilograms today, and began construction of the heavy water reactor in Arak.

Bush's dreams of reordering the Middle East blew up in his face. He got bogged down in counterinsurgency warfare in both Afghanistan and Iraq. On top of that, Washington's principal ally in the region, Israel, suffered an ignominious defeat at the hands of Iran's Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, in 2006.

To the horror of the U.S., Iran emerged from Bush's wars and occupations as the main victor. The Bush administration had toppled two of Iran's key enemies—the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. In this new situation, Iran was able exercise influence over what its enemies, with their sectarian vocabulary, called a "Shia Crescent"—stretching from Hezbollah in Lebanon, to Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, with its based among the Alawites, to the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in Iraq, to its Shia allies in Afghanistan.

Faced with failing occupations and the emergence of an emboldened Iran, the Bush administration abandoned his fantasies of rolling regime change in Iran and Syria. In an attempt to salvage the occupation of Iraq, the U.S. conducted a divide-and-rule campaign that split Sunnis against Shia, detonating a sectarian civil war. Washington then backed Saudi Arabia as it attempted to build a bloc of Sunni states to counter Iran's emergence as a regional power.

The Bush administration's failures opened the door to the Democrats and new President Barack Obama to chart an alternative course in the Middle East. Shocking liberal supporters who believed his reputation as being antiwar from the 2008 election campaign, Obama did the opposite—he largely continued the policies of the Bush administration in relation to Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran, while using different rhetoric.

Obama violated his promise to negotiate with Iran throughout his first term. Instead, Iran was repeatedly threatened with military action—while Israel took the lead in making threats, Obama nevertheless insisted that “all options were on the table.” The U.S. collaborated with Israel in covert operations to kill Iranian nuclear scientists, and it also unleashed the Stuxnet virus to disable computer systems that control Iran’s nuclear reactors.

The U.S. also cynically used Ahmadinejad’s repression of the Green Movement—which protested the theft of the 2009 election in which reformist Mir Hossein Mousavi was denied victory—to ram through yet more sanctions. But this failed to block Iran’s nuclear program, and Obama came under mounting pressure from Israel, Saudi Arabia and hawks in both the Democratic and Republican Parties to take military action against Iran.

But several developments compelled the Obama administration to abandon this belligerence against Iran, bypass its traditional allies Saudi Arabia and Israel and open secret negotiations with Iran in March 2013—significantly, three months before the election of Iran’s new president Rouhani.

The most important development is the ongoing decline of U.S. capacity to impose its preferred order on the Middle East. Iraq’s Maliki forced the U.S. to end its occupation of the country by refusing to accept Washington’s plans for leaving behind an unaccountable military and security force after Obama’s promised “withdrawal.”

Meanwhile, the expansion of the sectarian war in Iraq to Syria and beyond—driven by Saudi Arabia sponsorship of Sunni extremists—has threatened to plunge the whole region into chaos.

The Arab Revolt that began nearly three years ago further destabilized all the regimes across the Middle East and North Africa, whether they were allied to the U.S. or not. After first trying to defend the dictatorships it had relied on for decades in Arab countries, the U.S. changed course, claiming to support the democratic transitions in Tunisia and Egypt. But elsewhere, it tolerated other allies like Bahrain turning to brutal repression and sectarianism to divide and conquer the movement.

The Obama administration did try to hijack the revolution in Libya against dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi, despite his growing ties to the U.S. and especially its European allies. The U.S. did not repeat its failed attempts at colonial occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan, and instead opted to use its air power to support rebel forces.

The result was not a stable regime, however, but chaos, instability and an imperial embarrassment, when the U.S. embassy in Benghazi was attacked and U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens murdered.

In the aftermath, the Obama administration’s policy has emphasized stability and preservation of the existing order in the Middle East. Thus, in Yemen, the U.S. helped cobble together a deal to preserve the regime, minus dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh. In Syria, despite continuing threats, the U.S. avoided military intervention, including acquiescing to a last-minute deal on chemical weapons orchestrated by Assad’s main international backer Russia. The Obama administration

clearly favors a Yemeni-type solution for the country: preserve the dictatorial state, perhaps minus Assad.

This shift toward the goal of stabilization over regime change has put it at odds with both Saudi Arabia and Israel. The U.S. now opposes Saudi Arabia's support of Sunni extremists throughout the region and Israel's threats of war against Iran. In this context, the administration has adopted a policy, born of its weakness, of trying to manage a balance of power between states in the Middle East.

As part of this new policy, the Obama administration was willing to reach a deal on its nuclear program. But the Iranian government was also willing to engage in talks on Washington's terms—because of the impact of sanctions wrecking its economy, which, along with some regional setbacks of its own, produced a worsening legitimacy crisis.

The U.S. successfully imposed some of the most extreme international sanctions in history against Iran. They cut Iran's oil exports from 2 million barrels a day in 2012 to 1.1 million this year. The country's gross domestic product declined from 4 percent in 2009 to 0.4 percent in 2013—a period where most other countries in the world were going in the opposite direction. At the same time, inflation has shot up to an annual rate of 35 percent.

The crisis imposed by sanctions disrupted business for the ruling class and impoverished the working class majority. Unemployment jumped to 17 percent, with joblessness at 28.3 percent for young workers. As a result, 40 percent of the population lives in poverty.

Just as in Iraq during the Clinton administration's sanctions regime of the 1990s, sanctions have disrupted the health care industry. David Lindorf reports that they have “made it next to impossible for Iranian doctors and hospitals to obtain medicine from abroad for such relatively rare but serious diseases as hemophilia, multiple sclerosis (MS), various cancers, kidney failures, and thalassemia.”

While sanctions ravaged Iran domestically, Saudi Arabia's proxy wars against it have significantly reversed Iran's gains in the region. In Syria, Saudi Arabia continues to destabilize the situation by supporting Sunni sectarian militias that attack the Iranian-allied regime, while facing opposition as well from large parts of the rebellion that rose up against the Assad dictatorship.

Iran's ally Hezbollah in Lebanon has thrown itself into the civil war in Syria on behalf of Assad, but this in turn has opened Hezbollah up to sectarian attacks in Lebanon. And the Maliki regime in Iraq, which had been allowing Iran to transport aid to Assad through its airspace, was suddenly confronted with a renewed Saudi-backed Sunni resistance.

All of this combined to further undermine the legitimacy of the Iranian regime. Stratfor analyst George Friedman argues, “Iran could no longer withstand the economic repercussions of the sanctions regime. In light of Syria and Iraq, the nuclear program was a serious miscalculation

that produced an economic crisis. The failures in foreign policy and subsequent economic crisis discredited the policies of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.”

Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei recognized that Ahmadinejad and his so-called “principalist” faction had led Iran into a cul-de-sac. He permitted Rouhani to run in the election as a moderate reformer, promising to address the economic crisis, relax some of the Ahmadinejad’s excessive social restrictions and open negotiations with the U.S. about Iran’s nuclear program.

Sections of the ruling class represented by former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani backed Rouhani as the candidate best positioned to defeat the divided hard-liners. Then, in what one commentator calls an “electoral uprising,” Iranians gave Rouhani over 50 percent of the votes in the first round of elections, thoroughly trouncing the squabbling principalist candidates who split the remaining votes. Unlike in 2009, Khamenei immediately recognized Rouhani’s election.

No one should be under any illusion that Rouhani wants to serve the interests of country’s majority. As Michael Karadjis reports, he has conducted “a surge of executions—some 500 for the year, but 200 since Rouhani came to power in August. This includes political opponents, disproportionately Kurds.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—who already opposed Obama, going so far as to openly campaign for Mitt Romney in the 2012 presidential election—did everything he could to stop the U.S. from striking a deal with Iran.

At the United Nations, Netanyahu denounced Rouhani as a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” and claimed—in a fact-free rant resembling Colin Powell’s testimony about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction a decade earlier—that Iran was close to weaponizing its nuclear program. Netanyahu tried unsuccessfully to get the Russian and French governments to block the deal. He even threatened unilateral military action against Iran.

But much of this was hot air. Even Israel’s defense and intelligence establishment oppose Netanyahu’s war threats, recognizing that they can’t fight a war with Iran on their own. As retired Major Gen. Giora Eland, who served under Ariel Sharon, said, “Practically speaking, [a deal] shuts the [Israeli military] option down. It doesn’t matter what we think about the deal. Israel won’t be able to do a thing.” In the end, the U.S. simply overrode Israeli attempts to block the interim agreement.

Like Israel, Saudi Arabia did everything in its power to bloc the interim agreement. It wants to keep Iran under wraps for two key reasons. First, it fears that an Iran freed from sanctions could undermine its own key position as the swing oil producer in the world. Second, the Saudi regime advocates an extreme version of Sunni Islam, Wahhabism, which views Iran’s Shia population, and indeed all Shias, as apostates.

Therefore, along with Israel, Saudi Arabia also appealed to Russia and France to block the U.S.-negotiated agreement. But its efforts came to naught, and it soon gave up its public opposition. It remains dependent on the U.S. and had no choice but to accommodate itself to Obama's deal with Iran and his new balance of power strategy. Thus, Saudi Arabia's official statement supported the interim agreement.

The Obama administration's agreement with Iran, like its shift to a balance of power strategy, is an adjustment to the fact of U.S. weakness. The administration recognizes that the U.S. can't invade or enforce its will through airpower, but instead must bolster a pro-U.S. stability by positioning itself as the arbiter of conflict, playing states off one another to get its way.

The U.S. may try to use its developing relationship with Iran to help stabilize the conflicts in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, it will reach out to its traditional allies—above all, Israel and Saudi Arabia—to keep them on side.

Washington will try to cut deals with Saudi Arabia to prevent it from drifting into the orbit of Russia or China. Furthermore, the Obama administration will no doubt accommodate the worst of Netanyahu's plots to further dispossess Palestinians through the so-called peace process. Thus, Ali Abunimah and Osamah Khalil of Electronic Intifada argue:

...against any euphoria that escalating U.S.-Israeli tensions over the interim nuclear deal with Iran would lead the U.S. to shift toward a less anti-Palestinian policy on the "peace process" front. Rather, we predicted, the U.S. would move to appease Israeli anger with concessions at the expense of the Palestinians. It now appears this already coming to pass.

The new balance of power strategy does not mean the U.S. is withdrawing from the region. In fact, as journalist Seamus Milne documents, "The U.S. has been boosting its military presence and archipelago of bases in the Gulf, and the Middle East will continue to be crucial to the global energy market."

Obama has made his commitment to an unending American military presence in the region abundantly clear. The *New York Times* reports, "Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, opening a week of travels meant to reassure Persian Gulf allies nervous about an interim nuclear deal with Iran, vowed...that the Pentagon would not reduce its military deployments to the region or its focus on countering shared security threats."

This new strategy won't bring peace to the region. Balance-of-power politics don't have a good track record; all the European states practiced it in the run up to the First World War, and that clearly didn't end well. In the Middle East, America's strategy could backfire as it plays states off against one another and unintentionally exacerbates conflicts, instead of stabilizing them.

Moreover, American advocacy of neoliberal privatization and structural adjustment will further impoverish workers and the oppressed throughout the region, likely triggering more explosive struggles from below—which the U.S. will, in turn, help its allies in their attempts to quell them.

In the meantime, the U.S. has given the green light for Iran to reestablish economic relations with countries in the region and throughout the world. The consummation of such deals with international economic powers like China and regional ones like Turkey are dependent on the consummation of a comprehensive agreement by the end of the next six months.

The U.S. hopes this carrot of escaping sanctions and re-establishing economic trade with the world will compel Iran to accept U.S. terms in negotiations. But there are many roadblocks that could bring the talks to halt.

Israel and Saudi Arabia could disrupt the negotiations and scuttle a deal. Any agreement also faces hardline opposition in both Iran and the U.S.—even though negotiations is supported by a wide majority of the population of both countries.

Ahmadinejad’s “principalists,” who have so far been quiet, will also be looking to pounce on any concessions Rouhani makes to stop a final agreement. In the U.S., over the objections of the Obama administration, Senate leaders like Republican Bob Corker and Democrat Chuck Schumer are threatening to propose new sanctions that would effectively wreck negotiations.

The U.S. hardliners could compel Obama to push for the rollback of the nuclear program, a position that would be a deal-breaker for Iran. “Rollback may be a step too far for the Iranians,” Rouhani in particular, argues Vali Nasr, “because he can’t be seen at home giving up such a huge investment or abandoning national security.”

Anyone who cares about peace and justice will be happy that the threats of a catastrophic regional war unleashed by Israeli or U.S. military action have receded. But the Obama administration is aiming to impose Washington’s terms on Iran to shore up U.S. imperial domination against its regional and international rivals. All antiwar activists should oppose this drive—and instead build solidarity in a global uprising to put people before profit and empire.