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## Behind the US negotiations with Iran

Keith Jones

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Over the past two months, Washington has pulled back from a course that was leading it inexorably into a major Mideast war that would have dwarfed those US imperialism has waged since 1991. In September, the Obama administration abruptly dropped its threats of a military strike on Syria, a key Iranian ally. It then pivoted into talks with Iran, with which it had been holding secret negotiations for months.

On November 24, the US and its EU allies announced a six-month interim agreement with Tehran over its nuclear program. In exchange for a slight relaxation of sanctions, Iran will freeze and roll back its nuclear program, while it negotiates a “final agreement.” Last week’s deal is the first to be publicly acknowledged since the 1979 revolution that overthrew the brutal US-sponsored dictatorship of Shah Reza Pahlavi.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has insisted that the Iranian nuclear issue served as a pretext to isolate, threaten, and bully Iran into a neocolonial relationship with Washington. This analysis has been confirmed in the aftermath of the Iranian nuclear deal. The US and European press have ceased attacking Iran as a vicious theocratic dictatorship and are now full of prognoses for a US-Iran “grand bargain,” to give Iranian oil concessions to Western firms and align Iran and its allies with US foreign policy.

In its lead editorial, the British *Economist* strongly endorses the interim agreement with Iran, arguing “it can transform the world’s most troubled region” in the West’s favor and that the only alternative was “for America to abandon diplomacy—and prepare for an assault.”

“The immediate test and opportunity,” it adds , “will be Syria ... If anybody can bully [Syrian President Bashar al-Assad] to offer concessions, it is [Iranian President Hossan] Rouhani.”

Washington has also reportedly begun secret talks with Hezbollah, the Iranian-allied Lebanese Shiite political movement and militia.

What is emerging is not a “diplomatic turn,” as argued by sections of the media, but a turn to prosecute US imperialism’s drive for global hegemony more aggressively. It is seeking to turn Iran and the Middle East into US outposts in a conflict with its larger rivals—Russia and above all China—that directly threatens to unleash World War III.

Sections of the US foreign policy elite were concerned that another Mideast war would undermine Obama’s “pivot to Asia”—US imperialism’s drive to encircle and confront China and ensure American hegemony across Eurasia.

Already many of Washington’s client regimes in East Asia have expressed doubts over the US commitment to the pivot. Monday’s *New York Times* noted that “to make the promise of his ‘Asia pivot’ real, the president will have to convince Congress, and allies in the region, that he means to devote more military, diplomatic, and economic attention there.”

Freeing up such resources requires a shift in the Middle East policy US imperialism developed in the aftermath of the working class uprisings that toppled longtime US clients in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011. US imperialism responded by mounting wars for regime change against Libya and Syria, with Sunni Islamist elements like Al Qaeda serving as Washington’s main proxy forces.

While US imperialism had no objection to allying with its supposed enemy in the so-called “war on terror”—a political fraud designed to justify imperialist wars abroad and attacks on democratic rights at home—it was not satisfied with the results of this policy. Two years after NATO toppled and murdered Muammar Gaddafi, power in Libya remains largely in the hands of warring, anti-US Islamist militias. In Syria, the insurgency faces defeat due to popular opposition to sectarian atrocities of Sunni holy warriors backed by the US, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.

Now, the US is reconsidering whether it wants to pour more fuel on the fire of sectarian warfare that it ignited in the region, seeking to pit Sunni fundamentalist forces against the Syrian regime and its Shiite allies, principally Iran. In a column based on discussions with Obama administration insiders, the *Washington Post*’s David Ignatius explains, “The US message, not well communicated so far, is that its seeks an equilibrium in the Sunni-Shiite schism.”

As it seeks to carry out this abrupt policy shift, Washington calculates that Iran's clerical regime—which consolidated its rule by brutally suppressing all independent working class politics immediately after the 1979 revolution—is one with which it can do business.

Washington has long, though extremely tense relations with the Iranian theocracy. Tehran supported the US invasion of Afghanistan and tacitly backed the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In May 2003, it offered a “grand bargain” to Washington: if the US renounced its efforts to overthrow the Iranian regime, Iran would recognize Israel, help US occupation forces in Iraq, and cut off support to Hezbollah and the Palestinian group Hamas.

While the Bush administration rejected the deal at the time, Washington manifestly considers that, with Iran's economy crippled by US sanctions and class tensions rising inside Iran, the time is now ripe to try to work out a reactionary arrangement with Tehran. In the face of the deep Sunni-Shia sectarian tensions stoked by US policies, and opposition from its anti-Iranian allies such as Israel and the Sunni Saudi monarchy, it is forging ahead.

The chief obstacle to the preparations for global conflict by US imperialism and its allies is not to be found in rival regimes, however, but in the international working class. Workers in Iran are being targeted for free-market policies dictated jointly by the clerics and US imperialism, while workers in North America and Europe—as was shown by the unpopularity of plans for a US attack on Syria—are deeply opposed to further overseas wars, let alone plans for a major power conflict throughout Eurasia.

US policy is setting into motion not only the drive to further wars, but also immense class conflicts of the sort that have already led the working class to rise up and topple the Egyptian and Tunisian presidents.