



Hopi Briefing November 2013 **on the background to the Geneva talks and the impact of sanctions**

Main points

- Despite progress in the nuclear negotiations with Iran, US secretary of state John Kerry has promised that “95%” of sanctions will remain in place and conservative forces are already calling for more to remain;
- Sanctions are a form of war, a siege on a society;
- It has been the working people of Iran that have borne the brunt of sanctions; sections of the ruling elite in the regime have actually used the economic and social dislocation to further enrich themselves;
- Sanctions therefore serve the strategic aim of US-imperialism in the region of the installation of pro-western governments via ‘regime change from above’, not democratic upsurge from below;
- Recently, there has been a flurry of executions in Iran of activists from oppressed national minorities;
- Meanwhile, hundreds of political opponents of the regime, including leading workers’ movement activists, continue to be imprisoned – and in many cases – tortured;
- There are ominous parallels between this period of retreat by the Iranian regime (over nuclear negotiations) and that in 1987 (the end of the Iran-Iraq war);
- The end of the 1987 conflict sparked a murderous cull by the regime of thousands of left activists incarcerated in the regime’s jails as the theocracy sought to reinforce its control domestically after setbacks on the international front;
- Western governments and ‘human rights’ NGOs were silent over these outrages in 1987 and are so today.

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The past months of slow motion rapprochement between the Iranian regime and US-led imperialism have led to an uneasy agreement at the “Geneva talks”. As the agreement has caused controversy in Iran, the US and Israel, it is unlikely to last even the six months envisaged.

Nevertheless, there has been talk of “real progress” made and of the accommodating and ‘can do’ attitude of new Iranian president, Rowhani – a man that the imperialist powers are able to do business with.

Whatever happens next, the whole process has heavily underscored two central ideas that the anti-war campaign Hands Off the People of Iran has been hammering home since its foundation in 1997:

- **Sanctions are a form of war – the modern version of a laying siege. The main aim is not to harm the rich and powerful, but to demobilise and drive the working class and labouring peoples to desperation in order to facilitate regime change from above;**
- **The Tehran regime is *not* anti-imperialist. Whatever episodic conflicts arise between it and the US-led west, its essence is anti-working class, anti-democratic and capitalist.**

1. Sanctions are a form of war, a demobilising siege on the working people of Iran

While the wealthy and powerful of Iran have been mostly untouched by sanctions – indeed many have used the dislocation to become even richer – the ordinary people of Iran have been bogged down in an endless struggle for the basic necessities of life. The working class is exhausted and impoverished. Our brothers and sisters have to work three or four jobs to survive, wasting hours queuing for the basic necessities of life, unable to access adequate medical care even for the simplest of ailments. Faced with all of this, organising trade unions, political groups and other working class bodies in Iran becomes next to impossible.

In contrast, a Reuters investigation has discovered that a major foundation controlled by ayatollah Khamenei (Iran’s Supreme leader), Setad Ejraiye Farmane Hazrate Emam (literally the Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam), despite running a \$95 billion empire, has escaped the effects of sanctions scot free. The \$95 billion is accounted for by official holdings of real estate, corporate stakes and official assets, but in fact the recent revelations do not show all of Setad’s assets and it largely remains a clandestine financial organisation.

The foundation was created in the aftermath of 1979 revolution. Its more recent wealth comes from the privatisations carried out under former presidents Mohammad Khatami and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, making it one of the richest financial groups in the Middle East. It is amazing that Setad, with major interests in Iran’s industrial and financial sector, in petrochemicals, oil and telecommunications, has not been hit by sanctions – despite the fact that western governments are well aware that it controls whole swathes of the Iranian economy and is directly run by the supreme leader.

For instance, in July 2010 the European Union included Mohammad Mokhber, president of Setad, in a list of individuals and organisations sanctioned for alleged involvement in “nuclear or ballistic missiles activities”. But two years later, it mysteriously removed him.

This summer, as another 37 companies were added to the list of companies facing sanctions, and treasury officials reminded the US Senate committee overseeing them that Setad was

under the direct control of the supreme leader – yet the US decided to exempt it from sanctions. During recent revelations, when Reuters asked officials to explain the rationale behind this decision, they replied that they did not want to be accused of “attempts to topple the government”!

The Reuters exposé confirms what we in Hands Off the People of Iran and other opponents of sanctions have always said: the Iranian *people* are the real victims. Sanctions, heralded as ‘targeted’ and ‘intelligent’, have had little effect on the nuclear programme - and certainly not on the accumulation of wealth by Islamic foundations controlled or owned by senior clerics.

Despite the agreement reached in Geneva, most of the existing sanctions will remain in place. Iranians will still die as a result, but the multi-billion dollar institutions under the patronage of the supreme leader will continue to flourish.

This underlines that the west’s priorities are not ‘democracy’ in Iran. Ideally, it would like to see a stage-managed regime change from above and the installation of a pro-western government of some sort. For this scenario to work, a troublesome social ‘wildcard’ that could ruin things – the Iranian working class and its potential allies – *have to be removed from the political stage by the effect of sanctions*.

That’s why Hopi says: End all sanctions now!

2. ‘The Iranian regime is not a consistent anti-imperialist force – it is an anti-working class, reactionary force in the region’

Hopi has always been clear that the main enemy of the world’s working class and the biggest threat to peace is US-led imperialism. For us, however, this has never implied a softening on our attitude on the Iranian theocracy. It also is an enemy, albeit a far weaker force.

We have maintained this stance despite the farcical suggestions from some in the anti-war movement that any criticism of the Tehran regime is effectively *pro-imperialist*. (Hopi has been consistently denied the right to affiliate to the Stop the War Coalition, for instance).

The true nature of the theocratic regime is exposed by the recent talks. While it accommodates to imperialism abroad, it is dramatically turning up the repression on working class activists and opponents at home. Exiled Iranian observers tell us that the oppression is as bad as the worst periods of the rule of the last president, the west’s bogey-man Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

In the last week of October alone, Iran’s judicial system ordered the execution by hanging of at least 20 political opponents, all from national minorities (16 Baluchis and four Kurds). In West Azerbaijan province two Kurds who had been sentenced to death following brief trials were executed. Two other Kurdish political prisoners, both serving 30- year prison sentences for opposition to the regime and membership of an illegal organisation, suffered the same fate.

These brutal hangings were a clear message to all the regime’s opponents. Supreme leader Ali Khamenei might have ‘drunk the poison’ when he made his U-turn as far as international negotiations on Iran’s nuclear facilities are concerned, but he has no intention of tolerating any internal opposition or dissent.

There is a direct – and chilling – parallel here. Opposition groups have warned that last week's terror reprisals bear all the hallmarks of the type of repression the regime imposed immediately after the end of Iran-Iraq war in 1987. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's version of 'drinking the poison' (peace with Iraq) was followed by the execution of tens of thousands of political prisoners, some nearing the end of their jail sentences. Such measures are intended to demonstrate that, although the Islamic republic may have been forced to make foreign policy concessions, there will be no softening of its attitude to its internal opponents. Quite the opposite.

We should not forget that while in New York Rowhani spent a considerable amount of time discussing Iran's economy with the International Monetary Fund – the 'anti-imperialist' Iranian regime has been an IMF poster-boy for its vicious attacks on working class living standards and organising rights. As the latest 'economic restructuring programme' takes shape, tight control of the working class, of the ability of its movement's leaders to fight austerity and of the population more generally remains a high priority of the government. Terror and judicial murders play their role in this.

For us in Hands Off the People of Iran the urgent task is to save the lives of political prisoners - incarcerated labour activists; national and religious minority activists. We also need to publicise and support the struggles of thousands of workers who have had the courage to protest outside their factories, outside the Islamic *majles* (parliament) or in front of provincial offices, demanding payment of their withheld wages; workers at the Qazvin car manufacturing plant, workers in the petro-chemical industries, workers who have demonstrated in their tens of thousands against the drying up of the river Karoun in Khuzestan province.

It should be no surprise that Iran's new-found allies in the 'international community' are not condemning this wave of repression. Last year they were queuing up to support women's rights, and to try leaders of the Islamic regime for crimes committed in the past (the farcical Iran Tribunal). Today they pursue their interests through different means and show no interest in the recent executions.

This underlines that in the west – as in Iran itself – the consistent anti-imperialists, the consistent democrats and the consistent anti-war activists are to be found in the workers' movement and amongst those allies it can pull to its side. This means that our efforts cannot be tarnished by association with organisations such as the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the American Federation of Labor/Congress of Industrial Organizations, etc which have a history of collaboration with (and funding by) successive US administrations. Independent working class politics – in the west as in Iran – must mean independent working class finances and agendas.

That's why Hopi demands: Immediate, unconditional release of all labour and democratic activists held in prison!

(See attached 'Prisoners' PDF for info on some of our comrades in prison)

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The Saudis and Israel are fighting the settlement with Iran. Israel, in particular, is renowned for its almost pathological opposition to moves that – even from the point of view of the Israeli state – would seem to be in its interests. (Its adamant rejection of any form of Palestinian sovereign

state, no matter how Bantustan-like; the easing of tensions with a relatively strong and influential potential rival for regional hegemony, Iran, etc).

The Obama administration has already had worrying moments with Netanyahu and his bellicose defence minister, Ehud Barak. The US – Israel's main ally and major sponsor - do not wish to be dragged into a war by their Israeli junior partner. Israel has a ticking bomb, however: demographics. Since no large-scale Jewish immigration is now expected, and since the natural rate of increase of the Palestinian population is higher than that of the Hebrew population, the former will considerably outnumber the latter within a few decades. Surely, the Palestinian majority cannot indefinitely be denied equal rights; but equal rights would lead to the demise of the Jewish state. For Zionism this 'demographic peril' is worse even than a sovereign Palestinian mini-state.

Interestingly, quite a long time ago, on November 16 1989, a junior minister in the Shamir government made precisely this point in a speech delivered at Bar-Ilan University, a hotbed of clerical ultra-chauvinist Zionism.

The Jerusalem Post of November 19 1989, quoting a tape recording of the speech, reported that the deputy foreign minister (roughly equivalent to parliamentary under-secretary of state in Westminster) "has called for Israel to exploit political opportunities in order to expel large numbers of Palestinians from the [occupied] territories". He told students in a speech at Bar-Ilan University that "the government had failed to exploit politically favourable situations in order to carry out 'large-scale' expulsions at times when 'the damage would have been relatively small. I still believe that there are opportunities to expel many people'."

A "politically favourable" opportunity like... a war with Iran, perhaps?

The name of that junior minister was Binyamin Netanyahu, today's Israeli prime minister. This underlines the urgency of anti-war activists to increase their efforts and give all our support to that part of Iranian society that is our consistent ally in the fight against any more imperialist adventures in the Middle West.

Hopi is convening a conference in January 2014 to discussion these ideas and the implications they have for the future work of anti-war and anti-imperialist activists. *Be there!*