

Commentaries

No.1, March 2006

War in Iran?

Why we must oppose sanctions

For many in the anti-war movement the recent decision by the International Atomic Energy Authority to refer Iran to the United Nations Security Council for breach of its obligations under the nuclear weapons non-proliferation treaty is yet another step along the road to war. But is it the case that the Bush administration is preparing the way for yet another war in the Middle East? Are we seeing a rerun of the diplomatic build up that preceded the invasion of Iraq war? Is an invasion of Iran imminent? We shall argue that, although a limited air strike against Iran cannot be entirely ruled out, the current diplomatic offensive by the Bush regime is more likely to lead to sanctions than military conflict in the immediate future. But even so we must oppose sanctions just as vehemently as war.

It is certainly true that recently there has been plenty of sabre rattling within neo-conservative circles close to the Bush Administration. What is more, by officially announcing that all 'options are open', the Bush regime is clearly sending the message that it is not ruling out military conflict with Iran.

However, only last year it seemed that the issue of Iran's nuclear programme had been put on the back burner. The US had seemed content to allow the issue to be dealt with through long drawn out negotiations between Iran and the European powers. With American forces mired in an increasingly desperate situation in Iraq, and with growing opposition to the war and occupation of Iraq in the USA itself, it had seemed that any further plans for the reconstruction of the Middle East through forcible 'regime change' in Iran had been postponed indefinitely. Indeed, following the uprisings in Fallujah and Najaf in the Spring and Summer of 2004, the US had been obliged to ally with Shi'ite factions closely connected with Iran in order to head off a general insurrection against the coalition forces. As a result, the Americans had become increasingly dependent on the goodwill of the 'evil' Iranian regime to maintain its hold over Iraq.

Why then has Iran's nuclear programme suddenly been resurrected as a potential *casus belli* between the USA and Iran? Does this mean a US war with Iran? To answer such questions we must first look to what has been going on in Iran.

Class struggle and the rise of Iran's 'neo-conservatives'

Before the election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad as President of Iran in June 2005 most western commentators saw the politics of the Iranian regime in terms of two opposed factions. On the one side were

the conservative old guard, who were resolute in retaining ultimate political power in the hands of the clergy, insisted on the strict implementation of Islamic law and moral codes and opposed western cultural influences. On the other side were the more 'pro-western' reformists, backed by the reformist movement amongst the growing Iranian middle classes, who argued for a degree of cultural and political liberalisation.

Yet for all their disagreements over cultural and political issues, highlighted in detail by western bourgeois commentators, both conservatives and reformists within the regime have been united in protecting their own economic and commercial interests. For all their pious protestations, both conservatives and reformists have amassed private fortunes while the economy has largely stagnated. Through a programme of privatisation members of the regime have bought up state assets and enterprises on the cheap, and enhanced their profitability by cutting back on the wages and working conditions of those who work in them.

At the same time, whatever their rhetoric concerning the decadence of the west, both reformists and conservatives have been anxious to do business deals with western companies. As a consequence, neither faction within the Iranian regime has wanted an all out confrontation with the US that would disrupt their business interests.

However, in the last couple of years there has been an important change in the political situation in Iran. The middle class reformist movement, which emerged in the late 1990s, has run out steam and has been sidelined by a potentially more revolutionary working class movement.

In open defiance of the police, there have been numerous demonstrations calling neither merely for liberal reforms, nor even for the removal of the Islamic regime, but for the overthrow of capitalism. At the same time, despite the brutal repression of the Iranian state, there have been increasing numbers of strikes involving thousands of workers.

For example:¹

- In the autumn of 2004 Copper miners in the city of Babak staged sit-ins against compulsory redundancies. The Islamic regime responded by sending in special commando units that fired on the miners and their families from helicopters. In response to such atrocities the workers of Babak and Khatoonabad launched a general strike in these cities.
- Early last year textile workers in several cities across Iran went on strike. Mobilising support from workers across Iran, they were able to win major concessions.
- Since the spring of last year a spate of industrial actions swept Iran. According to the Iranian government's own estimates, in just the period from April to July there were more than 2000 workers' actions including strikes, occupations and road blockades. For example,
- More recently, in January of this year, 17000 bus drivers in Tehran went on strike. The Islamic regime has responded by arresting 1000 militants and violently attacking the families of the strikers.

The election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad last June, and the subsequent free hand he has been allowed by the theological guardians of the Islamic regime in re-ordering the Iranian government, can be seen as an attempt to head off the emerging social and political crisis in Iran and avert revolution.

Elected on a populist platform, which promised help for the poor and a reassertion of the Islamic ideals of the revolution of 1979, Ahmadinejad has brought about a radical re-orientation and re-organisation of the Iranian government. Leading positions in central and local government have been filled by Ahmadinejad's supporters. Most of which are, like Ahmadinejad himself, former members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp and veterans of the Iraq-Iran War of 1981-88, and are far less tainted by corruption than the old conservative and reformist leadership.

Ahmadinejad has been seeking to invoke anti-American, Islamic and nationalist sentiments amongst the Iranian population in order to shore up support for the Iranian Islamic state. At the same time, by renewing the ideological commitment to political Islam Ahmadinejad is attempting to restore the coherence of the Iranian regime that has become seriously eroded by corruption and the pursuit of individual self-interest.

As a result Ahmadinejad has adopted a far more bellicose and defiant line against the USA. The most prominent part of this shift in foreign policy towards the USA has been a far more defiant position on Iran's right to develop nuclear technology. But perhaps of more immediate concern to the US have been Iran's attempts to destabilise Iraq, with the American's accusing Iran of infiltrating Iraq with Special Forces.

The Iraq War²

Following the attack on the Twin Towers in September 2001 the neo-conservatives were able to seize control of US foreign policy and immediately set about implementing their plans for reasserting US hegemony ensuring an 'American 21st Century'. The first step in such plans was to cut through the Gordian knot of diplomatic ties that had built up over decades and forcibly re-order the Middle East to ensure privileged access to the cheap oil resources of the region and hence ensure the flow of oil and surplus profits for America's oil companies.

There is little doubt that Iran was central to the neo-conservatives' plans for forcibly re-ordering the Middle East. Indeed, as Bush made quite clear in his 'Axis of Evil' speech in 2002, after invading Afghanistan to the East, and Iraq to the West, Iran was next on the agenda. After all, Iran not only has the third largest oil reserves in the world but dominates the Persian Gulf and with it the oil producing regions of the Middle East. Furthermore, Iran is strategically situated between the oil rich Persian Gulf and the oil regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia that surround the Caspian Sea.

But the neo-conservative plans for re-ordering the Middle East have run into the sands of the Iraqi resistance. The pipe dreams of neo-conservative ideologues that a grateful Iraq population would rise up behind and carry the US puppet Chalabi to power on a neo-liberal programme soon went up in smoke. The subsequent attempt to foist the Ba'athist-lite Allawi as Iraqi Prime Minister proved to be too little, too late, being overtaken by the insurrections in Fallujah and Najaf. As a result the US has been forced to adopt a policy of divide and rule. Allying with Kurds and Shi'ite politicians the US has divided Iraq along ethnic and religious lines. All working class and secular opposition has been crushed and marginalized while Shi'ite militia have been allowed to take over Iraq's security forces and impose Islamic laws and social codes.

Yet, as the recent bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra and the consequent spate of sectarian killings vividly illustrates, this policy of divide and rule is in danger of driving Iraq towards all out civil war. The US faces the prospect of either a long term occupation of Iraq, which eventually ends in a negotiated withdrawal, or else being caught up in an all out civil war where they will be forced to 'cut and run'. At best the lucrative oil deals being negotiated with the current Iraqi government will take many years before

¹ For more detailed information on this upsurge in class struggle in Iran see the Worker-Communist Party of Iran www.wpiran.org

² For a more detailed analysis of the causes of the Iraq war see 'Oil Wars and World Orders Old and New' in *Aufheben* 12.

they can be implemented, at worst they may not be worth the paper they are being written on.

The neo-conservative pipe dreams have turned into a nightmare. Indeed, the main winner of the war in Iraq so far has been Iran! Not only has Iran's main regional rival - Iraq - been severely weakened but also US troops, which would have otherwise have been threatening Iran, are tied up in Iraq trying to contain the Iraqi resistance. Not only this but now the main faction in the ruling United Iraq Alliance is the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which was hosted and funded by Iran during its long years in exile during Saddam Hussein's reign, and whose militia - the Badr brigades - were trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and fought by their side in the Iraq-Iran war!

The American Response

The worsening situation in Iraq, and the consequent failure to forcibly re-order the Middle East, has led to a more general drift in US foreign policy. This is particularly the case in the geo-politics of oil. Most notably, China has taken the advantage of the post-Iraq war situation to begin, albeit rather tentatively, to draw together an Asian bloc, with Russia, India and the Central Asian states, to exclude the US from the region's oil fields. Not only this but both China and India have begun developing close economic ties with Iran and only last year signed important agreements for the supply of oil and gas with the Iranian regime.³

Closer to home, the USA faces an increasingly defiant Venezuela, which provides an increasing proportion of America's oil supplies. More generally, the recent rebuff given by South American leaders to Bush's proposals for an all-America's free trade zone has led many US commentators to fear that the US is losing control over its 'own back yard'.

The election of Ahmadinejad has pushed American foreign policy to the point of crisis. Certainly the coming to power of Ahmadinejad makes the danger of civil war in Iraq more likely. If the US is forced to cut and run from Iraq empty handed then it would not only be demoralising but would undoubtedly underline its weakness as a world power. However, Ahmadinejad's election has opened an opportunity for the Bush administration to rally both the American and the international bourgeois community against the 'threat' posed by Iran.

So, what are the options for the Bush regime?

Invasion - An all out invasion of Iran was never going to be easy. Firstly, unlike Iraq, Iran has a formidable military capability. It has a large well-equipped army and air force. Secondly, a full-scale invasion of Iran would have to deal with a far more difficult mountainous terrain than the desert and river valleys of Iraq. Thirdly, Iran has far more retaliatory capabilities. Its missiles are certainly able to hit America's potential allies in the

region - Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey - and may even be able to strike as far as central Europe.

With American forces already overstretched holding down Iraq, any full-scale invasion would require either a very large 'coalition of the willing' or the introduction of the draft in America itself. Either of which would seem unlikely.

A limited invasion - Recognising the infeasibility of an immediate full-scale invasion there are some neo-conservative hawks calling for a more limited invasion of the province of Khuzestan. Khuzestan comprises the southern coastal plain adjacent to the Persian Gulf and borders on to southern Iraq. It is argued that this province, which contains most of Iran's main oil fields, could be quickly captured by an assault by land, across the Iraqi border and by sea from the Persian Gulf

Although far more feasible than an outright invasion, a limited invasion of Khuzestan would still be a high-risk option and could lead to high levels of American casualties. Furthermore, even if it were successful, although it would severely weaken the regime it would not necessarily lead to its replacement by a more US-friendly one.

Air strikes - A far more likely military option would be targeted air strikes. This option is unlikely to lead to unacceptable American casualties. However, while such air strikes could 'take out installations necessary for Iran's nuclear capability', they are unlikely to lead to regime change. Indeed, as has been pointed out, the likely targets for such air strikes are sited close to large civilian populations. As a consequence, such air strikes may well cause substantial 'collateral damage' thereby increasing Iranian anti-Americanism and shoring up support for the regime as the only protection from such barbarous acts as bombing civilians

Furthermore, Ahmadinejad has made it quite clear that Iran will retaliate if it is attacked. The US would have to be prepared that any air strikes might lead to a rapid escalation in the conflict.

Coup or velvet revolution

An alternative means of regime change that has had some success in the former Eastern Bloc, most recently in the Ukraine, is to foment a 'velvet revolution' or internal coup. However, attempts to use such methods to overthrow Saddam Hussein in the 1990s only ended up in fiascos. Such methods are unlikely to work in conjunction with military threats or sanctions, which in the end tend to build support for the regime, as Iraq has clearly shown.

What is more, as we have seen, even if it did succeed in fomenting revolution it is likely not to produce the type of revolution the US would approve!

It is true that Condoleezza Rice has recently announced a large increase in the propaganda budget aimed at Iran and the Pentagon has been promoting the Mujahedin e-Khalq (MEZ) opposition group - which had formerly been designated as a 'terrorist organisation' by the CIA - but such efforts are not taken seriously in Iran. Attempts to set up television and radio stations and beam propaganda into Iraq are more likely to be of use during a future military conflict in order to spread

³ For a more detailed analysis of China and the geopolitics of oil in Asia see 'Welcome to the Chinese Century' in *Aufheben*14.

disinformation after established information channels have been disrupted than to promote a popular uprising. Likewise the MEZ, which has little popular support in Iran, is more likely to be used for sabotage during an invasion rather than to provide military or political backing for a coup or revolution inside Iran.

Sanctions

Given the current situation in Iraq, even a limited invasion of Iran seems out of the question. The most likely option favoured by the Bush regime, at least for the short to medium term, would seem to be the imposition of punitive economic sanctions against Iran.

Sanctions are unlikely to lead to regime change, indeed as we have already pointed out they are more likely to build support for the Iranian government, but they will weaken Iran economically and militarily and serve to buy time for the US. Sanctions will serve to bring to a halt the attempts by America's rivals from stealing a march on gaining access to Iran's oil wealth. If America cannot at present assure its oil corporations privileged access to Iran's oil and gas through regime change then sanctions can prevent China, European powers and India getting their hands on it.

However, although none of the great powers want Iran to gain nuclear weapons, at a time when the world's demand for oil is rising far faster than supply it will not be easy for the Bush regime to cajole the 'international bourgeois community' into imposing effective sanctions. Punitive sanctions can only work if the US can convince the other Great Powers to sacrifice their interest in gaining access to Iranian oil in order to ensure that an economic blockade is effectively imposed. This can only be achieved if multilateral sanctions are seen as a lesser evil than a unilateral military attack on Iran by the US. The Bush regime's diplomatic drive to build a consensus for economic sanctions against Iraq must be backed up by at least

the appearance of a realistic threat of military conflict if such efforts fail.

After all, military conflict may result in the US gaining exclusive access to Iran's oil wealth, or alternatively it might well lead to the destabilisation of Iran, if not the entire Middle East, resulting in substantial in oil production from the region. In either case America's rivals would lose out. At least sanctions buy them more time and keep them within the loop.

No to sanctions!

Before the first US-Iraq war in 1991 the anti-war movement called for 'sanctions not war!'. This proved to be a disastrous slogan: what happened was war, sanctions and yet more war. According to the UN's own estimates over 1.5 million died as a result of the war and sanctions on Iraq in the following ten years. Sanctions not only rallied support for the Ba'athist regime but gave it almost exclusive control over the distribution of food and medicines. As a result both Iraq's combative working class and its largely secular culture were smashed. We must not make the same mistake with Iran - we must oppose any sanctions that will impact on the living conditions of the Iranian working class.

Neither Bush nor Ahmadinejad

There can be little doubt as to the hypocrisy of Bush and Blair at condemning Iran's alleged breaches of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty when at the same time they themselves defy the treaty by maintaining and developing vast stockpiles of nuclear weapons. However, this must not blind us into supporting the brutal Iranian regime. In opposing our own war criminals of our ruling class we must show solidarity with the emerging working class movement in Iran.

Aufheben

Magazine - £3 annually from

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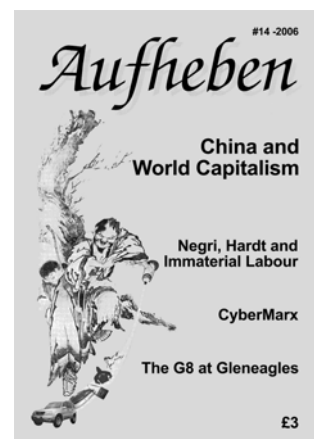
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