

POSITIONS ON IRAN

By Richard Duffee

In November 2004, six of us met at the home of Ardeshir and Ellie Ommami to form the American Iranian Friendship Committee (AIFC). Six to nine of us spent three months clarifying our positions to each other. In February 2005, we had our first public meeting at the Westchester People's Action Coalition. I was asked to summarize our positions. The following speech is that summary.

Much could be added to this, of course, but I see nothing serious to change in it. The two most important points to update it are these: 1) US-Iranian relations have steadily deteriorated, just as our relations with Iraq deteriorated between September 11, 2001, and March 19, 2003, for the simple reason that the Bush Administration wants to destroy them to create a case for war. The Bush Administration uses the same bullying and outrageous claims that are standard in Crimes against Peace as outlined by the Nuremberg Rules, and now adds the blockade, which is an act of war. 2) Just as Saddam Hussein's actual "offense" against the US elite was not weapons of mass destruction, but keeping oil in the ground because he knew "peak oil" meant the oil's value had to increase, Iran's actual "offense" is not its nuclear program but its opening of the first oil exchange to deal in Euros, which breaks the prior US-British monopoly on trading in oil, the only previous trading floors having been in New York and London, both using dollars.

I ask Greens and other interested people reading this piece to check for consistency between my positions three and a half years ago and my current positions. I am not aware of significant changes, and I hope that 4th District Greens feel as close to the positions I stated for the AIFC as the AIFC did.

AMERICAN IRANIAN FRIENDSHIP COMMITTEE POSITIONS, 2/2005

The basic problem of US-Iranian relations arises from the aggressive reach of the empire US leaders do not wish to state publicly they are leading. If the US lacked imperial ambitions, US-Iranian relations would not be potentially explosive, as they now are.

RELEVANT HISTORY

By the 1820's the American elite already felt themselves entitled to control the Western hemisphere, and by the 1890's the Pacific Rim, but the British and French empires limited further US expansion. The US entered WWII knowing that the European powers were unable to maintain their exclusive empires, and that the war had created a power vacuum the US could fill. By 1948 US plans to fill that vacuum were well formulated, with the former roles of the British and French (and, to a lesser extent, the Portuguese, Italians, and Belgians) to be taken over by the G7 under US leadership, primarily through the Bretton Woods Institutions (the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, etc.), but also through the UN and treaty organizations like NATO and SEATO, with plenty of room left for unilateral US action. After WWII, imperialism changed in three ways. First, to lessen European conflict and allow the formation of the EU, empire was no longer to be exclusive, but was to be managed collectively through international institutions. Second, military and administrative costs were to be born primarily by the ex-colonies, which were to maintain their subordinate status as

“service economies.” Third, in the poor countries local elites were to be created, elites who would consider their own interests more dependent on international than on popular support.

In this plan to run most of the world as service economies for the G7, the primary impediment was “economic nationalism,” the desire of leaders faithful to their constituents to run their economies for the sake of their constituents rather than for the sake of the G7. Economic nationalism took three main forms Washington opposed: communism, the peasant communitarianism of some of the poorest countries, and the Islamic nationalism of the oil states. Washington tried to polarize the second into the first and used Islam to oppose the first. When communism was essentially defeated in 1990, Washington turned to focus on Islamic oil wars.

Greed for oil was a cause of war before issues of conflict with Islam arose. The French and Japanese believed there was oil in Vietnam, as there was in Brunei. The British, French, Americans, and Russians had all competed for control of Middle Eastern oil before any Islamic states were in a position to resist them. Much of the fighting in both WWI and WWII was over access to oil, the essential machine food without which war cannot be fought. Before the 1970's, Western capitalists expressed their contempt for native interests in Middle Eastern oil quite openly. An experienced international lawyer privately paraphrased their position this way: “Before we came, there were just a bunch of Arabs riding camels around on the sand. They didn't know there was oil beneath it and didn't care, and never would have done anything to get it out.” This “Finders Keepers” attitude underpinned all US action in the Middle East until the formation of OPEC made it possible to some extent for oil states to assert their interests in their own resources.

Since the 1920's, US energy policies have been extraordinarily irresponsible. In the late 20's Buckminster Fuller invented a “Dymaxion” car that could run on anything but water; oil and automobile companies squelched it. Preston Tucker designed a car in the 1940's that could be made and run far cheaper than Detroit cars; the Detroit companies made it impossible for him to produce it. From the 1930's to 1950's the “Big Three” car companies bought up all US light rail transportation contracts, tore up the tracks, replaced trolleys with buses, then phased out the bus service to make Americans dependent on cars. Oil, electricity, and car companies bought up any patent that could form the basis of successful competition with their centralized control of energy. Now more than 50% of Americans live in suburbs without public transport. The US has become more dependent on oil than any other country on earth. The US government has never squarely faced the consequences, and has always funded research into oil and nuclear energy at vastly higher rates than research into any alternatives. When George H.W. Bush said, “The American way of life is not negotiable,” the core of what he meant was that no matter how great the pressure from environmentalists, he would never negotiate to reduce our unparalleled energy consumption, which makes him and his elite supporters so rich and powerful.

Since the 1970's geologists made projections for the rate of exhaustion of oil supplies, and by the 1990's these were known to hold true for at least the US. The crucial projection was that between 2004 and 2008, 50% of all known reserves would have been pumped, and, because extracting the second 50% of any deposit is always more expensive than extracting the first 50%, prices would irrevocably and exponentially rise. Rather than adapt to this problem by re-creating public transportation, conserving energy, and developing alternative means, the projection of available profit from an oil-addicted economy as supply shrank proved so attractive to corporate leaders, and the politicians they control, that the US chose to expand

the scope of military intimidation rather than rationally restructure its energy demands and options.

Oil wars are essentially the price the world has to pay for the irresponsibility of US oil and automobile corporations and the politicians they fund. A number of secondary issues get entangled in the basic one caused by the “Finders Keepers” mentality. First, there is the intimately connected issue of the US balance of trade, for the US has the largest trade deficit on earth, and so is always in danger of losing investors. Second, there is the more general issue of the overvaluation of the dollar relative to its purchasing power; the profitability of multinationals depends on maintaining as much of this discrepancy as possible in the face of competition with other hi-tech countries. Increase in the price of oil and the trade deficit partly caused by our dependency on imported oil jeopardize the overvaluation of the dollar. Third, there are four linked geo-political motives: first, power over the Middle East is also power over Japan and Europe, because they depend on Middle Eastern oil. Second, power over the Middle East is power over the relations between Europe and the rest of Asia and East Africa. Third, power over the Middle East is power over any potential southern expansion of Russia and westward expansion of China. Fourth, US power over the Middle East is always linked to Israel, and the continuing drama of Israeli-Palestinian relations is always a spark point for feelings of Muslim solidarity, one in which the US has, for the last 60 years, been an obfuscator and antagonist, not an actual mediator of peace.

AIFC POSITIONS

The AIFC’s position is that the supposed cultural conflicts between the US and Iran, and other Islamic countries, would have little salience were it not for oil. Muslims have lived in peace with both Jews and Christians for most of the 1400 years they have lived in proximity. Just as the US did not have trouble with the USSR because the USSR (or Russia) was an “expansive imperial power,” but rather because the US was too, and so competed for the same space, so the US and Christians do not have trouble with Islam because Islam is an “expansive proselytizing religion,” but rather because the US is an expansive empire and most conventional Christianity is an expansive proselytizing religion too. In AIFC’s view, if we are not greedy for oil, but are willing to limit our own consumption, and if we are not greedy to convert people, we have lost the first and second greatest causes of conflict with Iran. The first is material greed; the second is “spiritual” arrogance. We reject both.

AIFC notes an element of racism in current American aggression toward Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Iran. The US would handle similar problems very differently if they arose in Europe; the US response would be more like its response to the conflicts in the 1990’s in the successor states of Yugoslavia—though that was hardly a model to be imitated. There would be more concern for UN cooperation, willingness to set up genuine war crimes tribunals, more aid, more humanitarian interest, more interest in assisting democratic evolution, instead of the current hints that people should overthrow their government, the passing of judgment on the future actions of the Iranian government, the issuance of ultimatums.

AIFC notes that the case that Iran is a terrorist state is as weak as the case that Iraq was. Terrorism emanated from Afghanistan, where it had links to the CIA, and from Saudi Arabia, under a regime close to the US, far more than to Iraq or Iran. The US uses the charge of terrorism as an excuse for aggression in the same way that Hitler used that same charge in the 1930’s as an excuse to gain “Lebensraum.”

Another reason is offered us to justify bullying, and potentially invading Iran: the Iranian government may be developing nuclear weapons. The AIFC's first response to this is that it is a response, like that of the USSR, to American possession of nuclear weapons. In its nuclear policies, the US has flouted world public opinion since 1945, and has been in violation of explicit international law since the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) 1996 advisory opinion. The US fails to condemn Israeli nuclear weapons, and so is hypocritical in its condemnation of the Iranian program. If the US wants Iran to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and to observe it, there are many obvious steps the US can take, but it refuses to consider them. The US presumes that its mere power entitles it to run the world hypocritically in its own exclusive interest. If the US were serious about an international legal order that could prevent conflicts over issues like Iran's nuclear policies, it would sign on to the International Criminal Court, or grant jurisdiction to the ICJ, or reduce its own stockpiles, or stop backing Israel until it relinquishes its nuclear weapons. Since the US takes NONE of these steps, the AIFC believes the nuclear issue is spurious in a way analogous to the spurious claim that Iraq had WMD's.

The AIFC holds that the current US posture toward Iran has far more to do with projects to get oil out of the Commonwealth of Independent States (former Soviet republics), and to control the oil in southern Iran, than to produce any beneficial "regime change." Under international law, regime change is not a permissible motive for war. It is an expressly forbidden motive for aggression. Since the Iraqi election, US leaders are returning to the argument that the US invasion was beneficial and justified despite the falsity of the argument actually used, the supposed presence of WMD's. AIFC is concerned that the intensification of rhetoric that regime change is a ground for war is being used to set the stage to justify invading Iran. AIFC does not support US rogue state behavior any more than Iraq's or Iran's. AIFC holds that international law is to be obeyed, that the US is as subject to it as any other nation, and should be held accountable. AIFC holds that the primary threats of violence the US now faces are blowback from US covert activity and its military bases around the world.

AIFC notes that the demise of the League of Nations followed from its allowing Italy to attack Ethiopia and Germany to aid Franco. For the US and Britain to scorn the position of the Security Council, and for the Security Council to fail to censure the US and Britain, is to follow the same course toward chaos and war. AIFC urges the member states of the UN to take stronger positions against unilateral aggression, war crimes, state terrorism, false claims like those regarding WMD's, and the justification of war on grounds of the need to violate state sovereignty to change regimes. AIFC understands the reluctance of national leaders to take stronger stands against US and British aggression; no national leader wants to have his nation put on the US State Department's list of "terrorist nations and nations that support terrorism." But it would be devastating for the UN to go the way of the League of Nations. Instead, it should be reformed to make it more democratic, to remove the bottleneck of veto power, and to give democratic control over areas now dominated by the rich through the Bretton Woods Institutions.

AIFC does not find plausible Samuel Huntington's position that a "clash of civilizations" is inevitable. We do not believe the Jews, Christians, and Muslims cannot live in peace. We do not believe that problems that arise among nations dominated by different religious groups cannot be solved by adherence to international law. International law is capable of progressive development so long as the nations of the world have the will to build appropriate international institutions and to change them according to the actual needs of the peoples of

the earth, rather than allowing dominance by the richest and most powerful. We appeal to other nations to resist the bullying and bribery of the currently most powerful.

The government of Iran is theocratic. This can never justify making war on Iran, and no one pretends that international law says it does. Nor is theocracy even a plausible motive for war: the governments of Nepal, Bhutan, and Israel have strong theocratic elements, but the US makes no claim that their regimes must be overthrown for that reason. No one believed the Chinese claim that Tibet needed to be invaded because it was theocratic. For that matter, the government of Ireland still has some theocratic elements, and the government of Spain did in recent memory, but the US never imagined invading them for such a reason. We could even go further: the Bush administration itself has adopted a number of theocratic principles, but no one on earth demands its violent overthrow for that reason. Nor does theocratic law present any difficulty for international law: jurists trained in Islamic law have served with high distinction on the International Court of Justice.

AIFC holds that the appropriate response to terrorism, both by state and non-state agents, is the progressive development of institutions of international law. The US, in flouting international law, acts as a terrorist state, becomes an example of illegal behavior, and provokes non-state terrorism. For sixty years the US has blocked the development of international criminal courts, and it still allows only international courts of limited jurisdiction, even while unilaterally arrogating to itself the right to extend its own jurisdiction to places like Panama, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The hypocritical self-aggrandizement of its position is obvious to the rest of the world.

Nor does AIFC believe that the US is somehow uniquely qualified to “spread democracy around the world.” The parliamentary systems, proportional representation, the use of referenda, fewer advantages for incumbents, stricter rules for political money, and stronger observance of human rights treaties all give European countries and Canada far more structural democracy than the US has, and their greater equality of wealth, and hence less dependency of the general population on the wealthy, makes the actual practice of democracy easier in them, for citizens are freer to speak their minds without risking unemployment. US education below the graduate level is also inferior to that of other developed countries, so US citizens are more poorly informed in making political choices. AIFC is not impressed when American politicians posture as champions of democracy.

At present pressure is building in the Pentagon to reinstate the draft. AIFC deplores this. Americans should not be sent to kill people and to risk their lives in the interests of pursuing imperial interests and salvaging a failed and irresponsible energy policy. AIFC supports counter-recruitment efforts and will offer counseling for draft resisters and conscientious objectors. AIFC believes it legitimate to conscientiously object to war fought for oil and imperial ambition, in the pursuit of ends illegal under international law. To confine conscientious objector status to those who believe it wrong to fight in any war ignores the crucial difference between aggression and defense, and, under current circumstances, unconstitutionally leaves the definition of justifiable war in the hands of a small elite in the executive branch.

AIFC RECOMMENDATIONS

AIFC holds that the following actions will promote peace with Iran:

- 1) The US should sign the charter of the International Criminal Court and accept its jurisdiction.
- 2) The US should phase out its own arsenals of weapons of mass destruction.
- 3) The US should allow Iran and Europe to work out their mutual accommodations without interference.
- 4) The US should cancel Department of Energy funds now going to research into oil and nuclear power, and redirect those funds to research into the improvement of mass transportation, alternative sources of energy, and conservation.
- 5) For the sake of peace and the environment, we should each cut our oil and energy consumption. We should each find the baseline of what we now consume, reduce our consumption each year, and devote a portion of the savings to projects of public benefit.
- 6) So that we can better judge the value of current arguments and propaganda, we should each educate ourselves in the history of US imperialism and aggression, the global environmental impact of our consumption, the history of Islam and the Middle East, and the relations between the rich and the poor countries.
- 7) So that we will not be taken in by simplistic propaganda and warmongering, we should study and discuss in detail the commonalities and differences among doctrines of the various groups of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.
- 8) Those of us from Christian backgrounds should form personal relationships with Muslims and Jews; Muslims should form personal relationships with Jews and Christians, Jews with Christians and Muslims. We should urge religious institutions with which we have contact to form analogous affiliations. We should urge our local towns to affiliate with towns in Iran and promote exchange programs.
- 9) We should lobby to have funds that would be wasted on hostile actions toward Iran to be spent instead on aiding Iranian schools and hospitals.
- 10) So that we can better direct our limited energy, we should meet often to discuss our projects, the difficulties of their implementation, and signs of their success and failure.

There are two positions I personally hold that I believe are consistent with AIFC's goals and methods, but have not been adopted by AIFC. I urge them on other members:

- 1) In the light of the Law of Diminishing Returns, it makes sense to consume no more than all persons on earth could consume if those with more gave their excess to those with less, that is, the world average income. Because the world does not have the environmental carrying capacity for over 6 billion to each consume as much as the average citizens of the rich countries consume, it is impossible to create sustainable economies without reducing consumption in the rich countries. It is hypocritical to urge sustainability without cutting our own consumption. To voluntarily restrict one's own consumption and to give one's excess to those with less is to show that one is in earnest in one's desire for peace and sustainable prosperity.
- 2) The world can no longer afford the massed power of nations as large as the US. The US and other large nations should follow the example of the USSR in dismembering itself until they become of a size that smaller nations can hope to tame and deal with as equals. Such a world would be far safer.

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