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**Spotlight on Iran**

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**Iranian criticism over decision to award Nobel Peace Prize to President Barack Obama**

Last week's decision to award the Nobel Peace Prize to US President Barack Obama was met with strong reservations in Iran. Iran's Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said the decision to award the prize to President Obama was "rash and premature". However, in an interview granted to Mehr News Agency, Mottaki said that Iran would not object if the decision led to abandoning the warmongering, unilateral policy of previous US administrations and to

promoting an attitude based on a just peace. He further added that the proper timing for awarding the Peace Prize to President Obama would have been following the withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq and Afghanistan and supporting the Palestinian people's rights (Mehr, October 9).

Majles Speaker Ali Larijani also strongly criticized the decision to award the prize to President Obama, claiming that the decision about awarding the prize was part of a "soft war" designed to lay the groundwork for Western hegemony. While the previous American administration used military force, Larijani said, the US is now gradually adopting "soft warfare" methods in light of the serious challenges facing it in Iraq and Afghanistan (Mehr, October 11).

Ali Akbar Javanfekr, President Ahmadinejad's media advisor, commented on Obama's Peace Prize award, saying that the president must now work harder than ever to end world injustice. If the president of the US abolished the veto right now reserved for the five permanent members of the Security Council, Javanfekr said, it would be proof that the prize had been rightfully awarded. President Obama must also announce his plan for reducing the gap between the rich and the poor in the US and in other US-influenced countries, and to prove that the US does not intend to throw away its surplus wheat but rather to transfer it to African countries (Fars, October 9).

Not surprisingly, the daily Keyhan also criticized the Nobel Peace Prize award, saying that it was given to President Obama even as the "massacre" perpetrated by the occupiers in Afghanistan escalated in the past year and while the Zionists still had Obama's go-ahead to perpetrate crimes in Jerusalem, Gaza, and the Lebanese border (Keyhan, October 10). The award was given to Obama for the "dream of peace" instead of the "realization of peace", according to Keyhan (Keyhan, October 11).

The conservative daily Jomhuri-ye Eslami also criticized the Nobel Prize Committee's decision last week, calling it a "joke". An editorial published by the daily on October 11 says that even President Obama himself, who was surprised by the award, is well aware that he had done nothing to make him worthy of it. Obama has yet to realize any of his stated pre-election objectives for peace. Furthermore, during his brief presidency the President of the US has taken steps which do not reflect his being a man of peace and has even become accomplice to international crimes against humanity, mainly the crimes of the Zionists in Gaza.

President Obama's conduct in Afghanistan and Iraq also cannot justify a Nobel Peace Prize. Not only did he not pull out the US forces from Afghanistan, he even ordered to increase the number of American troops in that country, and killings of civilians there have become more

frequent in recent months. Also, he has not followed through on his promise to pull out the US forces from Iraq, while America's covert and overt influence in that country has only increased.

Those in charge of awarding the Nobel Prize listed Obama's willingness to commence talks with Iran as one of the reasons behind their decision. But that willingness, according to Jomhuri-ye Eslami, also does not reflect his desire for peace. First, since Obama would like to negotiate with Iran without recognizing its rights, and second, since even as the negotiations with Iran take place, Obama continues to follow his policy of anti-Iranian sanctions and even attempts to secure the support of other countries to increase those sanctions. The daily says that those measures demonstrate that not only is Obama not interested in establishing peace across the globe, but he actually wants to see colonialism expanded. His call for global nuclear demilitarization is just a slogan, when in fact he has done nothing to destroy the huge nuclear stockpiles held by the US and Israel.



A slightly different approach could be seen in the reformist daily E'temad, saying that the West had been so concerned about George Bush's policy that it rushed to welcome Obama's before it was even put to practice. A Nobel Peace Prize for Obama is in reality a prize for a "non-Bush, non-neoconservative" policy, showing support for a solution to global problems which does not involve threats (E'temad, October 11). Reformist daily Mardom Salari, which also dedicated an editorial last week to President Obama's Peace Prize award, claimed that Obama had done nothing to reinforce global peace and therefore did not deserve a prize, saying that a truly worthy candidate would have been Iran's former president Mohammad Khatami, who brought up the idea of inter-civilization dialogue (Mardom Salari, October 12).

### **On the way to economic reform? Majles began discussing reforms in the government subsidy policy**

Last week, the Iranian Majles began discussing the reform plan in the government's subsidy policy. According to the plan, current subsidies given to all the population for fuel, natural

gas, electricity, water, and bread will be canceled and replaced by welfare payments for those in need, in accordance with information provided by citizens to the authorities over the past year. The plan was submitted by President Ahmadinejad to the approval of the Majles already in late 2008, however, it was rejected in its original incarnation. In the last several months, an expert commission on behalf of the Majles has drawn up a revised bill for carrying out the plan over several years. On the eve of the Majles discussion, President Ahmadinejad once again called to implement the reform in order to streamline Iran's economic system (Mehr, October 10). Ahmadinejad noted that the subsidy reform was the most important economic program in the past 50 years, and that it was designed to lay the groundwork for an extensive reform in Iran's economy and for economic growth (Fars, October 11).

For several years, Iran's subsidy reform has been the target of strong criticism by Iranian politicians and economists and also by international economic organizations. The GDP percentage spent in Iran on those subsidies is one of the highest in the world. According to the supporters of the subsidy policy reform, the current policy benefits the stronger sectors of Iran's society, while the reform will make it possible to direct most of the subsidies to the weaker sectors. Various studies show Iran's wealthy citizens enjoy nearly 50 percent of the subsidies, while the poor enjoy only 15. The current subsidy policy has other negative effects, such as overspending, wasting energy sources, and inefficiency in economic production mechanisms.

As part of the reform plan suggested by the president, the prices of petroleum, natural gas, electricity, and water will gradually increase over the next three years. According to his proposal, most of the expected revenue from abolishing the subsidies will be transferred in the form of direct payments to the weaker sectors, and will also go towards strengthening social security, increasing health insurance, providing housing assistance, creating workplaces for the weaker sectors, and providing better welfare services to those in need.

Despite the broad-based agreement on the basic need of changing the subsidy policy, the president's plan was met with strong criticism. Its critics claimed, among other things, that transferring payments directly to citizens would encourage private consumption, which would in turn accelerate inflation, and that the time frame set for carrying out the plan was not enough to mitigate its inflationary effects, which may lead to a double-digit increase in prices.

The argument between the plan's supporters and opponents lasted also during the Majles discussion last week. Majles member Alireza Mahjoub warned that the realization of the plan would make Iran's economy more dependent on the global economic system, that it would devalue Iran's national currency and hurt the weaker sectors of society. Majles member

Eqbal Mohammadi said that the plan would lead to 50-percent inflation. On the other hand, Arsalan Fathipour, chairman of the Majles Economy Committee, claimed that the plan would improve Iran's consumption habits and trigger economic growth (Mehr, October 11).

### **Political protest takes yet another shape: political slogans on money bills**

Morteza Tala'i, chairman of the Tehran municipality Culture Committee, called upon Iran's authorities last week to take measures against the phenomenon of writing political slogans on money bills, which has become widespread in recent months.

Tala'i called upon Iran's Central Bank to issue a regulation prohibiting citizens from accepting bills with "anti-revolutionary" political slogans and messages, and to put those bills out of circulation. In an interview to government-controlled IRNA news agency, Tala'i said that writing slogans on walls and bills had no effect on the Iranian public, and that it served no purpose whatsoever. He noted, however, that both the citizens and the various institutions had to take measures against that phenomenon, and not to allow an insignificant minority to discredit the Islamic regime and the citizens of Iran. Tala'i, who formerly served as the internal security forces chief in Tehran, said that the Iranian public expected the authorities to do whatever was necessary against those who engaged in such activities (IRNA, October 11). Tala'i's call was also taken up last week by several conservative Majles members (E'temad, October 12).

In recent months, writing political slogans on bills and walls of public buildings across Iran has become one of the forms of protest against the authorities in the wake of the last presidential elections. Those slogans include messages against senior regime officials and in favor of the reformist opposition.



**Political slogans on bills**  
<http://asre-nou.net/php/view.php?objnr=5973>

Tala'i's statement was criticized by Asr-e Iran, a news website affiliated with the conservative pragmatic bloc. The website states that Tala'i's proposal to put the slogan-bearing bills out of circulation is impractical, since the phenomenon is widespread and cannot be monitored. Taxi cab drivers, for example, cannot be expected to check every bill they receive from their passengers for political slogans. If realized, Tala'i's proposal could lead to an endless and highly expensive circle of writing slogans on bills, collecting the "prohibited" bills, taking them out of circulation, and producing new ones, according to the website.

Asr-e Iran further claims that in Iranian society, which has no respect for those who criticize senior state officials, it is only natural that people should recourse to such means as writing slogans on money bills to express their protest. Those willing to tackle the phenomenon would do better to call on the authorities to fully implement the principles of freedom of expression and peaceful protest, as stated in Iran's constitution. If Iran allowed lawful, orderly freedom of expression, there would be no need for some Iranians to express their protest in bizarre ways (Asr-e Iran, October 12).

### **New crisis in Iranian-British relations over the Cyrus Decree**

Britain's decision to ban British companies from trading with Iran Shipping Lines and Bank Mellat predictably triggered strong reactions in Iran. Similarly harsh reactions came in the wake of an announcement by the British Museum saying that it would not send the Cyrus Cylinder to Iran for public display at Iran's National Museum due to the latest political events there. A spokesman for the British Museum said last week that the museum still intended to lend the cylinder to Iran, but that now was not the right time given the political circumstances in the country.

The Cyrus Cylinder is a piece of clay inscribed with an Akkadian-language version of the Cyrus Decree. Issued in 538 BC, the decree allowed all nations under Cyrus's law to resume worship of their gods. The cylinder was discovered in 1879 by British Assyriologist Hormoz Rassam and is now housed in the British Museum.

From the early 1970s, and particularly during the festivities held by the deposed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in October 1971 celebrating 2500 years of Iranian monarchy, the significance of the Cyrus Decree was emphasized and it became one of the symbols of the monarchy. As part of the attempts to nurture Iranian national culture and to increase Iranians' awareness of their pre-Islamic past, it was even asserted that the decree was "the first human rights charter in history".



Iranian senior officials reacted strongly last week to the British Museum's decision to indefinitely postpone loaning the Cyrus Cylinder to Iran. Hamid Baqa'i, chief of the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, harshly condemned the announcement of the British Museum, saying that it was a breach of agreement signed between it and Iran's National Museum, according to which the British Museum pledged to send the cylinder to the Iranian museum this year for public display in Tehran.

Baqa'i noted that his organization had sent a protest letter to the management of the British Museum, saying that the museum was trying to avoid its obligation to send the cylinder to Iran under various pretexts. It does not befit a scientific institution, said Baqa'i, to make use of various political excuses to avoid carrying out its obligations. He even threatened that if the British Museum did not send the cylinder to Tehran within two months, Iran would freeze its cultural and scientific cooperation with Britain and would not allow British researchers to take part in archaeological digs in Iran (Fars, October 12).

When asked to comment on the issue during his weekly press conference, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hassan Qashqavi defined the decision of the British Museum as an illegal, irrational, and political move (various news agencies, October 12).

**Picture of the week: former president Mohammad Khatami celebrates his 66th birthday**

