

Iranian Threats and the UN Sanctions Debate

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Brief Analysis

On January 26, Hussein Shariatmadari -- the publisher of Iran's most influential newspaper and a close confidant of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei -- stated that attacks on "Zionists, Americans, and European countries that support Israel," as well as on compliant regional rulers, were both morally permissible and easily carried out. Indeed, Iran's hardliners engage in not only heated rhetoric, but also heated action -- from funding terrorists to ignoring international nuclear mandates. Accordingly, while the UN Security Council attempts to set the agenda with a new round of sanctions, the hardliners may forgo passivity and go on the offensive.

The Latest Provocation

Shariatmadari's commentary in Keyhan included threats to many players across the globe:

"All around the world, the crucial centers of Zionists, Americans, and European countries that support Israel are accessible to Muslims. Is it not true that access to many Zionist individuals in the four corners of the world is easily possible? Based on this, there is no human or legal principle that will deter any attack on these centers or people. . . . Maybe when they see that they will have to pay for their actions with their own life and property they will reconsider their support for these savage Zionists. . . . In the course of war against the enemies of Islam, it is permitted to attack those who shield the enemy. Hence, if the rulers of certain Islamic states prevent Muslims from attacking Zionists and keep Muslims from helping oppressed Palestinian people, it is possible to remove these enemy shields."

Perhaps Shariatmadari was just indulging in his normal provocative language, similar to his remarks on Bahrain last summer: "The principal demand of the Bahraini people today is to return this province, which was separated from Iran, to its mother, Islamic Iran." But his words are in the same tone as the hardliners' February 2007 threat that preceded the March hostage crisis involving British sailors (see [PolicyWatch no. 1194 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2563\)](#), February 9, 2007).

Despite the regime's past and present provocations, however, a total ban on all Iranian exports is not the best approach, considering that a similar seven-year ban in Iraq (before the oil-for-food program) showed that such blunt-axe approaches to sanctions hurt ordinary people and do not necessarily change a government's behavior. Instead, the Security Council should design "smart sanctions" based on careful consideration of the four criteria below.

Do the Sanctions Pressure Iran's Political Elite?

The most important goal of the sanctions should be to convince Iran's political elite that their current course is too risky and costly. The recent U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) argued that "Tehran's decisions are guided by a cost-benefit approach rather than a rush to a weapon irrespective of the political, economic, and military costs." Since Tehran thought it would face less pressure on the nuclear issue after the NIE, the new round of sanctions will serve as a useful reminder that the issue is not going away. A unanimous vote would be particularly helpful for demonstrating the breadth of international concern.

Yet, the ten months of protracted negotiations since the last round of sanctions suggest there is little agreement on how much more to press the regime. (Final approval of the new sanctions resolution is expected within weeks of Libya's February 1 handover of the Security Council presidency to Panama.) It would not be surprising if Iran's leaders have concluded that modest additional sanctions are the worst they may have to face. They may also have concluded -- accurately -- that Iran's economy is boosted by high oil prices more than it is hurt by sanctions. Even if that equation changes, important figures such as Khamenei do not seem to care much about the economy.

French president Nicolas Sarkozy has expressed concern that the choice may come down to "Iran with a bomb or bombing Iran." Yet, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad has frequently and firmly insisted Iran has no need to worry about preemptive strikes; the new sanctions resolution is not likely to change his calculus. His domestic critics, who spent much of 2007 warning about the risks of his needlessly confrontational approach, have fallen silent about the matter since the NIE, shifting their attacks to his economic program.

Will the Sanctions Slow Iran's Nuclear Program?

Many of the measures adopted by the UN so far, and many of those said to be under consideration for a new resolution, are aimed at Iran's nuclear and missile programs. Such sanctions, often derided as symbolic, are better described as narrowly focused, since they could have a real impact on nuclear progress. The regime's enrichment efforts have already spanned two decades, and the International Atomic Energy Agency has verified that Iranian centrifuges are working far below capacity, suggesting continuing technical problems. Further impeding access to materials and information might slow Iran's ability to produce enough highly enriched uranium for a bomb until the later part of the NIE's estimated 2010-2015 range.

Is There an Enforcement Mechanism?

The draft of the third sanctions resolution appears to call for "vigilance" and "monitoring"; in other words, governments are being asked to be helpful, rather than being ordered to take action. The resolution apparently will not establish any expert monitoring teams, such as those used to good advantage in the UN sanctions on Sudan, Somalia, Liberia, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. But this should not stop the United States and Europe from approaching other governments to provide information and assistance to thoroughly enforce the sanctions. To date, the West has done little if anything to make actionable information available to other governments -- particularly those that lack the resources or the sense of urgency to pay much attention to questionable Iranian activities, but which might be prepared to enforce the UN mandate if violations were brought to light.

Experience has shown that private firms are more sensitive than governments to what the U.S. Treasury Department likes to call "reputational risk." Banks detest vague warnings and implied threats from governments. They are already skittish in light of the October 11, 2007, warning by the intergovernmental Financial Action Task Force that Iran's practices "represent a significant vulnerability within the international financial system." Accordingly, one can expect more Western pressure on banks to reconsider their business in Iran.

Do the Sanctions Preserve People-To-People Contact?

Sanctions must strike a delicate balance, imposing the sting of diplomatic disapproval without cutting off the ties that connect ordinary Iranians to the outside world. The risk is that a broad sanctions regime would fall disproportionately on Iran's professional classes -- the ones who are the most culturally, politically, and economically integrated into the international system.

To achieve the two goals of isolating the government while keeping the people connected, the new resolution should be accompanied by measures outside the UN. First, since even the hardliners care deeply about Iran's global image, its neighbors and other developing countries should be encouraged to make complaints to Tehran about its nuclear standoff with the UN. Second, there should be expanded outreach to ordinary Iranians, such as more government-sponsored scholarships and quicker processing of visa applications, similar to those funded by the controversial U.S. December package for promoting democracy in Iran.

Conclusion

Most likely, the new UN sanctions will have a very limited positive effect. Iran's hardliners may decide to take the initiative and push hard against the West, potentially making their next provocative action measurably worse. That said, the longer Iran's nuclear program is slowed, the more likely the regime's fundamental weaknesses will be evident, as will the West's abiding strengths. It will not be easy to tell if progress is being made because the pattern of negotiations with Iran is generally stalemate, then breakthrough. Regardless, even the most optimistic reading of the new sanctions makes Sarkozy's choice -- Iran with a bomb or bombing Iran -- more, rather than less, likely.

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