

An Easy Step Toward Tightening Iran Sanctions

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Articles & Testimony

As the UN formulates the next round of sanctions against Iran, it should consider including something missing from the two earlier Security Council resolutions on Iran. The addition of an independent monitoring team, which the UN has used effectively in its sanctions against Sudan, Somalia, Liberia, and al-Qaida/Taliban, would demonstrate that the UN is serious about this regime, and that these resolutions are more than just empty threats.

Critics have charged that the two previous Iran-related resolutions -- 1737 and 1747 -- passed in December 2006 and March 2007 respectively, were too weak. In fact, the US ambassador to the UN recently acknowledged that "what we have done so far has not been enough," and "the time has come to take a look at additional pressure."

The criticism has been largely directed at the punitive aspects of the resolutions, including the absence of a mandatory travel ban for designated Iranian officials and the one-way arms embargo prohibiting Iran only from exporting weapons.

Although these critiques are fair, and the shortcomings should be addressed in upcoming resolutions, the failure to include a monitoring team -- or expert panel -- as they are frequently known may be no less significant. Without such a team, ensuring that countries are complying with the resolutions becomes almost an impossible task. These independent teams -- comprised of consultants hired for their expertise in the particular area at issue -- operate with considerable autonomy. The teams are generally based in the field, away from the UN bureaucracy in New York, and are only in existence for a limited period of time, with a clearly defined mandate.

The UN's Sudan expert panel has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of such teams. The team, based in Ethiopia, has put together damaging reports with detailed evidence -- including photographic -- of how the Sudanese (and others) are violating the sanctions.

Perhaps most notably, they described how the Sudanese are bombing the civilian population using aircraft painted white to make them appear to be UN or African Union planes. This revelation, which sparked a worldwide outcry, has helped build international pressure against the Sudanese government.

For the two Iran resolutions, the arrangements in place to ensure compliance are extremely limited. Under the resolutions, countries are called upon to report to the UN the steps they've taken in response to the sanctions. The merits of such an approach can be questioned; how candid will countries be regarding their own failings? Even beyond the issue of the reports' accuracy, many of the countries had not filed submissions by the UN deadline.

Furthermore, the UN has inadequate capacity to thoroughly review the reports it receives, let alone take the necessary follow-up action. While the UN has established a committee for the Iran resolutions, it does not measure up to the expert panels. This committee is composed only of the 15 members of the Security Council, who already have responsibility for all of the other Security Council business and sanctions programs. No additional experts were brought on to handle these new duties.

Having an independent panel of bona fide experts devoting all of their attention to this issue, who then draft one comprehensive report for the Security Council, is certainly a more effective way to proceed.

There is already plenty for an expert panel to investigate, despite the current sanctions' limitations. For example, all UN member states are required to freeze the assets of a number of key Iranian government agencies, officials and companies. These include Iran's Atomic Energy Agency, the commanders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp and the Iranian Air Force, as well as Bank Sepah a major Iranian financial institution with branches throughout the world. Resolution 1747 also prohibits Iran from selling or exporting arms, which should cover any weapons transfers to Hizbullah. As sanctions are expanded, the expert team's jurisdiction could be broadened accordingly.

By focusing on these issues, the expert team could also help supplement the work of the International Atomic Energy Agency. While the IAEA is looking at Iran's compliance with some aspects of 1737 and 1747, they are more focused on general questions about the state of Iran's nuclear program, and do not have the time or expertise to devote to these other key issues.

If the international community is truly determined to try and change Teheran's decision making on its nuclear program through economic pressure, it must make far greater use of all of its available tools. The IAEA's latest report, warning that its understanding of Iran's nuclear program is "deteriorating" and that it could not provide assurances about "the exclusively peaceful nature" of Iran's nuclear program should be incentive enough to swiftly move forward on this potentially promising track.

The writer, a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Terrorism, Intelligence, and Policy, previously served as a senior advisor in the Treasury Department's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence. ❖

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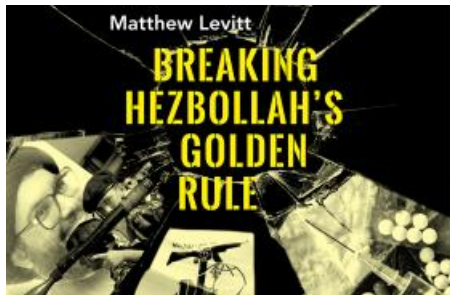
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