

US imposes unilateral sanctions on Iran: One step closer to war

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In an act unprecedented in the history of international relations, Washington on Thursday unilaterally imposed harsh and potentially crippling economic sanctions against Iran's main uniformed security force, as well as against more than 20 Iranian companies and the country's three major banks.

The sanctions, announced by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson, represent a deliberate provocation aimed at precluding any negotiated settlement to the dispute over Iran's nuclear program and making a US war against the country all but inevitable.

In announcing the measures—which are considerably more punitive than those imposed by Washington during the seizure of the US embassy which followed the 1979 Iranian revolution—Rice said they were designed “to increase the costs to Iran of its irresponsible behavior.”

The sanctions are directed in the first instance against Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, which the US government has now branded as “proliferators of weapons of mass destruction,” and its Quds Force, which has been labeled a “supporter of terrorism.”

The Revolutionary Guards, a force of some 125,000, is responsible for law enforcement, border patrol and resistance against foreign attack. It also organizes Iran's people's militia, providing military training to some 12 million volunteers.

The Quds Force is a special unit within the Revolutionary Guards that handles overseas operations. It has acted in a number of countries with the direct approval of Washington.

In Bosnia, it provided arms to the US-backed Muslim government; in Afghanistan, it aided the forces fighting the Soviet military and then supported those fighting the Taliban; in Iraq, it assisted Kurdish guerrillas against the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein.

Elsewhere, it has aided organizations opposed by the US, principally those resisting Israeli aggression, such as Hezbollah, the mass Shia movement in Lebanon, and organizations in the occupied Palestinian territories.

By imposing these designations upon the official armed forces of a sovereign state, the Bush administration is carrying out a brazen intervention into the internal affairs of Iran. In so doing, it is setting out a pseudo-legal framework for war, spelling out two alternative pretexts—weapons of mass destruction and terrorism—which are identical to those contrived and propagated in preparation for the unprovoked US invasion of Iraq.

Washington has charged that Iran is pursuing its nuclear program in order to construct a nuclear weapon. Tehran has denied this charge, insisting that it is utilizing the program for peaceful purposes, in particular, the development of an alternative power source.

In regard to the second casus belli, the Bush administration and some senior US military commanders have repeatedly accused Iran and the Quds Force, in particular, of arming, funding and training forces in Iraq responsible for attacks on US occupation troops.

Washington has yet to provide concrete evidence to back these charges and has produced no one that it can credibly claim is an Iranian agent engaged in these alleged activities. Tehran has denied responsibility for the attacks, which it points out are carried out in their great majority by Sunni resistance fighters, not the Shia movements with which the Iranians have enjoyed a longstanding relationship.

The sanctions against the Revolutionary Guards are aimed at inflicting significant damage to the Iranian economy. The Guards' role in Iran includes far-ranging economic activities.

Its engineering unit, for example is involved in a number of major projects, ranging from a \$2 billion contract for the development of the country's main gas field, to a \$1.3 billion contract for a new pipeline directed to Pakistan, to the construction of a Tehran metro extension, a high-speed rail link between the capital and Isfahan, shipping ports and a major dam.

The immediate impact of sanctions allowing the freezing of assets in US banks or barring US businesses from economic ties to the Iranian Guards, as well as the named Iranian bank and other companies, is negligible, given that Washington's imposition of sanctions in response to the 1979 revolution that overthrew the US-backed dictatorship of the Shah had already largely frozen American banks and corporations out of the Iranian market.

Blackmailing foreign banks and corporations

The aim of these measures—which are far more sweeping than anything the US could hope to get passed in the United Nations—is to blackmail foreign banks and corporations with the threat that their continued operations inside Iran could lead to American-imposed penalties and exclusion from the US market.

Treasury Secretary Paulson called upon “responsible banks and companies around the world” to cut off all ties with the named bank, companies and all affiliates of the Revolutionary Guards. US officials have stressed that the Guards' ties are so widespread that any economic relations whatsoever with Iran carry with them the threat of US retaliation.

The US action won quick endorsement from the British government of Prime Minister Gordon Brown, which, according to some press reports, has also signaled its willingness to go along with eventual US air strikes against Iran. Brown appears prepared to play the same role that Blair played in paving the way for the invasion of Iraq, by pushing for the United Nations Security Council to impose another set of sanctions, a move that is opposed by Russia and China, both of which have substantial interests in Iran and hold veto power on the council. In 2003, Bush invoked the failure of the UN to pass a resolution authorizing military action as the pretext for unilaterally launching the US war.

Other European powers, however, were more cool towards Washington's diktat. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said Thursday that any decision on further sanctions against Iran should await an evaluation of Iran's willingness to answer more questions from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). German companies exported \$5.7 billion worth of goods to Iran last year, while the German Economics Ministry granted the government in Tehran \$1.2 billion in export credit guarantees.

Iran's new nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili, joined by his predecessor, Ali Larijani, held two days of talks this week with the European Union's foreign policy director, Javier Solana, in Rome to discuss Tehran's nuclear program. At the end of the talks Wednesday, the Iranian negotiators joined Solana and Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi in a joint press conference in Rome. Both sides described the talks as "constructive," while Prodi insisted that "dialogue is the only way to find a solution for Iran's nuclear program in the UN Security Council and Italy encourages this way."

Russian President Vladimir Putin voiced a harsh reaction to the US sanctions. Meeting with European Union leaders at a summit in Portugal, he insisted that the controversy over Iran's nuclear program should be resolved through negotiations, along the lines of those pursued with North Korea.

"Why worsen the situation and bring it to a dead end by threatening sanctions or military action?" Putin said. In an obvious characterization of Bush, he continued, "Running around like a madman with a razor blade, waving it around, is not the best way to resolve the situation."

Iran dismissed the US sanctions. "The hostile policies of America against the respectful Iranian nation and our legal organizations are against international regulations and have no value," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini. "Such ridiculous measures cannot rescue the Americans from the crisis they themselves have created in Iraq."

Speaking at a conference on "Privatization in Iran" held in Dubai for foreign investors, the head of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Mines, Mohammad Nahvandian, said that while the sanctions could lead to "an increase in costs," they could not "disturb or stop Iran's massive trade relations with other countries."

The principal aim of the sanctions, however, appears to be not so much economic as political. By increasing tensions, they are designed to slam the door on any negotiated settlement of the nuclear dispute and pave the way for US military action.

In that sense they are of a piece with the steady escalation of threats against Iran, including Bush's warning last week about "World War III" and Cheney's threat last Sunday that Iran would face "serious consequences" if it continued on its present course, and that the US would not "stand by as a terror-supporting state fulfills its most aggressive ambitions."

Fresh evidence of US war preparations against Iran came in the details of the nearly \$200 billion budget request sent to Congress last Monday for funding the continuation of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Included was nearly \$88 million for fitting "bunker-busting" bombs onto B-2 stealth bombers. Some lawmakers and congressional aides pointed out that there is little use for such weapons in the current counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, and that

the bombs were in all likelihood intended for attacking Iran's underground nuclear facilities.

As the Bush administration prepares for yet another war, the Democrats in Congress have once again emerged as willing accomplices. The administration's imposition of sanctions was actually prefigured by legislation passed in the Democratic-led House—by an overwhelming 397-16 vote—that would impose sanctions on non-US energy companies doing business in Iran.

While Democratic leaders claimed the measure was intended to cut off funding for Iran's nuclear program, its real intention is evident. American oil conglomerates frozen out of the Iranian market want to deny their competitors any advantage.

In the final analysis, the propaganda about nuclear threats and terrorism notwithstanding, a US war against Iran would be launched to impose American capitalism's hegemonic control over the strategic oil reserves of the Persian Gulf.

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