Trends. Terrorism and Sanctions: A Problem with Iran

Editor

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According to the United States (US) Department of State, Iran continues to be engaged in three kinds of activities that preclude closer cooperation with the US: (1) supporting international terrorism; (2) developing weapons of mass destruction; and (3) hindering peace initiatives between the Palestinian National Authority and Israel and among other Mideast political entities. The US has proclaimed sanctions against Iran as a vehicle to decrease the frequency and intensity of the above activities. One class of sanctions is supposed to bar most U.S. companies from engaging in trade and investment with Iran. The other class is supposed to bar non-U.S. companies from engaging in investment and trade with Iran worth more than $20 million.

Are the sanctions effective? There appear to be two immediate impediments to effectiveness. (1) The US has selectively enforced the sanctions. For example, a US-based oil company, Conoco, was forced to cancel a $2 billion contract with Iran while a consortium of companies from Malaysia, Russia, and France was granted a waiver for a very similar deal. (2) The timing of granting waivers from the sanctions has at times occurred to maximize the positive reinforcement of behaviors contributing to Iranian misbehavior. For example, the consortium described in (1) above was granted the waiver in return for an agreement to try and prevent the sale of nuclear technology to Iran. Yet the waiver--temporally placed almost immediately after nuclear technology sales--seems likely to positively reinforce the sale of nuclear technology and increase its likelihood in the future!