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Trends. Terrorism and Sanctions: A Problem with Iran

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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!

Together with the common critique that sanctions often (1) hurt U.S. business, the U.S. economy, and the businesses and economies of allies; (2) hurt citizens in the US and elsewhere; and (3) leave government decision-makers who authorize problematic behaviors largely unscathed, sanctions may be more than an ineffectual antiterrorist and counterterrorist response. As long as they are in place to the exclusion of more effective interventions--for, after all, other interventions will be likely deemed unnecessary if an existing intervention is viewed as effective--sanctions also can be conceived as supporting terrorism, the development of weapons of mass destruction, and the subversion of peace. (See Haas, R.N. (1997). Sanctioning madness. *Foreign Affairs*, 76, 74-85; Pape, R. (Fall 1997). Why economic sanctions do not work. *International Security*, 22,, 90-136; Perlez, J., & LeVine, S. (August 9, 1998). Curbs on Iran anger American firms. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Piazza, C. C., Fisher, W.W., et al. (1997). The use of positive and negative reinforcement in the treatment of escape-maintained destructive behavior. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 30, 279-298; Schmitt, E. (July 31, 1998). U.S. backs off sanctions, seeing poor effect abroad. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Takahashi, M., & Fujihara, T. (1995). Self-control and choice in humans: Effects of type, amount, and delay of reinforcers. *Learning and Motivation*, 26, 183-202; Weekman, D.E. (Winter 1998). Sanctions: The invisible hand of statecraft. *Strategic Review*, 26, 39-45.) (Keywords: Iran, Sanctions, Terrorism.)