
Iran, Its Nuclear Ambition, Its Human Right Abuses and the Dependence on Foreign Imported Oil

By Mervyn Danker

On the last day of 2011, President Obama signed into law stringent sanctions aimed at Iran, including an embargo on the country's crude oil and prohibiting dealings with the Central Bank of Tehran. This was followed by the European Union pursuing similar sanctions.

Tehran has responded by threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz, through which a sizeable percentage of the world's oil supply (including Iran's) passes on a daily basis. Since then the posturing and saber rattling has increased with Israel contemplating openly the best moment to use its bunker busting bombs. However, any Israeli action of this sort would never be debated in the open prior to any action.

In the midst of all this focus on Iran's quest for a nuclear weapon and economic measures to thwart this acquisition, the human rights abuses in that country deserve a close examination.

We should recall the insight by Soviet physicist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Andrei Sakharov, who pointed out that "the defense of human rights . . . [is] the only sure basis for genuine and lasting international cooperation." Iran must be pressured, by the UN, the U.S., and others, to alter its human rights record fundamentally before we can hope to make genuine progress on other issues of global importance. UN member states put Iranian human rights abuses front and center by endorsing two new reports that express grave concern about the country's continuing assault on human rights. A resolution, introduced by Canada, gained 89 countries voting in favor and 39 against, with 64 abstentions. All of the Western democracies supported the nonbinding resolution.

The UN resolution identifies a wide range of heinous acts carried out by Iranian government agents, including the frequent use of torture, flogging and amputation, infliction of capital punishment for vaguely defined crimes, often through coerced confessions, public executions and secret group executions, infliction of the death penalty against minors, and execution by stoning – despite a government rule against it – and by prolonged strangulation. It is reported elsewhere that Iran executed more than 450 people in 2011, one-third of them in secret executions.

UN members also express deep concern at "pervasive gender inequality and violence against women" in Iran, as well as a continuing crackdown on women's human rights defenders and violent repression and arrest of women exercising their right to peaceful assembly. The UN reports on Iran both focus on the persistent arrest of women working for the "Campaign for Equality," which seeks to bring attention to serious

forms of gender inequality enshrined in Iranian law.

Iran has engaged in “ongoing, systemic, and serious” infringement of freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly, according to the UN resolution. The resolution notes the extensive imprisonment of journalists and bloggers, the forceful breaking up of demonstrations, unfair trial practices that prevail in the Iranian revolutionary courts, and arrests and death sentences for the vague charge of “enmity against God.” The UN resolution calls on Iran to immediately release those detained “for simply exercising their right to peaceful assembly and participating in peaceful protests.”

Iranian violations of the rights of minorities, including Christians, Jews, Sufis, Sunni Muslims, Zoroastrians, Arabs, Azeris, Baluchis and Kurds, are also cited in the UN resolution. It particularly highlights persecution of members of the Baha’i faith, noting that they have been arbitrarily imprisoned and denied employment, government benefits and higher education; and that twenty-year prison sentences were reinstated against leaders of their faith following “deeply flawed legal proceedings.”

The UN also calls for Iran to launch an impartial investigation of allegations of killings and other abuses in the crackdown by police and paramilitaries that followed the 2009 presidential elections, which were widely perceived as fraudulent. Iran was pressed to prosecute those responsible for the post-election abuses and to ensure that the upcoming 2012 parliamentary elections “reflect the will of the people.”

These findings remind everyone that it is vitally important that all member states support the UN’s efforts to improve the human rights situation in Iran and the specific recommendations it has set out as a necessary course of action. This includes pressing Iran to cooperate fully with the mandate of the Special Rapporteur and to allow him to visit the country, to allow for the fair investigation of and public reporting on human rights violations, to stop the practice of imprisoning and executing those who express dissent, and to release those already imprisoned. For all of Iran’s bluster and denial, its leaders are sensitive to such criticism. Iran responded by withdrawing its application for a seat on the UN Human Rights Council in 2010, after an international outcry about how it treats its own people.

Iran’s human rights record illustrates its leadership’s contempt for humanity. That along with the realization that Iran may soon possess a nuclear weapon provides added impetus to press for change.

Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons capability, support for international terrorism, and disregard for international law are crystal clear. The international community has used a mix of diplomacy and economic sanctions to try to modify Iranian behavior, but Iranian defiance demands stronger measures.

The terrorist traits of the Iranian regime were exposed again in October of 2011, when American officials revealed an Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the U.S. The crime was to have taken place in a crowded, upscale Washington restaurant,

and had it been carried out, many would have been killed. According to government informants, attacks were also planned on the Saudi and Israeli embassies in Washington and in Buenos Aires.

The assassination plot was “directed and approved by elements of the Iranian government and, specifically, senior members of the Quds Force,” declared Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr., who added that “high-up officials” in agencies that are “an integral part of the Iranian government, were responsible for this plot” to strike in the heart of Washington.

Then, on November 8, 2011, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) issued a report stating that while it has not yet produced a bomb, “Iran has carried out activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device.” This was not nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, as Iran’s government claims, but the type of technology that is “specific to nuclear weapons.”

This information came from the IAEA, the UN’s nuclear watchdog, not from the intelligence branch of any particular nation, as had been the case with the allegations about Saddam Hussein’s nuclear plans that led to the second Iraq war. The State Department called the report “comprehensive, credible, quite damning, and alarming.” An Iranian nuclear weapon carried by missiles would endanger Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Israel and even Europe – not to mention wreaking havoc with the world’s oil supplies.

Most recently, on November 29, 2011, after Great Britain increased its own sanctions by banning all dealings with Iran’s Central Bank – on which the country’s oil exports depend – dozens of Iranians stormed two British embassy locations in Tehran and wreaked havoc, while several hundred more Iranians demonstrated outside, chanting “Death to Britain!” This latest attack brought back nightmarish memories of what happened to the U.S. embassy there in 1979, and the 444-day hostage ordeal of its occupants. Certain that Iranian authorities were behind this breach of international law, British Foreign Secretary William Hague warned of “serious consequences.”

The British followed through with that warning by shutting their embassy and expelling all Iranian diplomats from London. Several European governments joined by withdrawing their ambassadors from Iran in protest. While Russia and China are unlikely to follow suit, the EU as a unit should call its ambassadors home, just as it did in 2009 to protest the coup that ousted the lawful government of Honduras. (The U.S. does not have a diplomatic mission in Iran.)

The most recent poll (taken before the most recent sanctions) of Iranian opinion, the December 2010 survey released by the International Peace Institute, notes that while most Iranians support the nuclear program, they consider the existing economic sanctions the country’s number one problem and think that Iran should focus on solving its domestic problems rather than on becoming the leading power in the region.

The Menendez-Kirk Iran Sanctions Amendment, passed unanimously by the U.S. Senate, would restrict American financial institutions from dealings with any foreign financial institution that knowingly does significant business with Iran's Central Bank. It also freezes Iranian assets in the U.S. and requires the president to engage in diplomacy to convince other nations to cease importing oil from Iran. While the House of Representatives has passed a version of the bill, the Administration tried to weaken sanctions before it became law.

Menendez-Kirk, with tough sanctions and vigorous enforcement, sends a clear message to the Iranian regime that violation of treaty obligations and Security Council sanctions in pursuit of nuclear weapons will come at a heavy, unsustainable price. This kind of strong US leadership will encourage other nations to act similarly, as the European Union has done. Strong diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions can stop the momentum.

These sanctions are only viable if the U.S. can break its addiction to foreign oil. Iran, with every new threat of sanctions its economy hurting from current international sanctions aimed at thwarting its nuclear ambitions, threatens to close the Strait of Hormuz should the West place a full embargo on Iranian oil. Since closing the strait would cut off 20 percent of the world's tanker-carried oil supply, oil prices have already shot up to almost \$100 a barrel. They will undoubtedly rise far higher if the Iranians make good on their threat.

Rather than speculate about the suggested scenarios for resolving the crisis, it may be worthwhile to look at what got us into it in the first place. America's oil addiction is an old problem, first coming to our attention in the form of the 1973 oil embargo that led to sky-high prices and long lines at the gas pump. Unfortunately, several of the countries receiving huge amounts of our petrodollars, simply because they are blessed with the largest oil reserves, are hostile to the U.S. or are potentially unstable regimes. Every president since Nixon has promised to push through legislation to cure our oil addiction but none has succeeded.

We need, first, to conserve energy by vastly increasing the fuel efficiency of American vehicles. Current law is moving in the right direction, mandating a 54.5-miles-per-gallon standard for cars and light trucks by 2025. There should be no delay or backtracking on this standard, and, if anything, it should be raised even higher.

Second, we must develop alternative fuel options. We must pass the Open Fuel Standards Act, currently before Congress, which would require that by 2014, half of all new automobiles be capable of operating on something in addition to gasoline - this includes electric and hybrid-electric vehicles, as well as the traditional "flex-fuels," ethanol biodiesel, and methanol. The manufacturing cost of making a car flex-fuel capable is only \$100 per vehicle. Another promising approach is the provision of federal subsidies and tax credits for the purchase of plug-in electric and natural-gas-powered vehicles. Congress is considering such legislation.

The third step is to encourage the use of, and investment in, public transportation.

Fourth, foreign oil from a friendly source can be made available through approval of the Keystone XL pipeline project, which would transport Western Canadian Sedimentary Basin crude oil from Alberta, Canada, to points in Oklahoma and Texas. Overland pipelines from Canada are far safer than African or Asian shipping routes. Canada is a democratic ally and, at a time of high unemployment, the project would produce thousands of jobs for American workers, which is why it is supported by the American labor movement. However, the Obama Administration opposes the pipeline.

Finally, our nation must locate and develop new domestic sources of oil and gas. In an understandable reaction to the disastrous Gulf oil spill, there was, for a time, a government ban on offshore drilling. More stringent safety and environmental regulations are now in place, and the Administration has lifted the ban. Nevertheless, action is needed to expedite the issuance of more drilling permits.

None of these steps will be easy. Some will require Americans to sacrifice personal comfort and change their accustomed way of doing things. But the standoff in the Persian Gulf shows just how vital it is for the U.S. to take a stand for human-rights world wide, to assure that Iran will not gain access to nuclear weaponry, and to guarantee American energy security by weaning ourselves off oil from overseas. If we manage to do so, the people of the world will be better off for it.

