

Protesters storm British embassy in Tehran over new sanctions

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Protesters stormed two British embassy compounds in Tehran on Tuesday, angered by a raft of damaging new economic sanctions imposed by Britain, the US and Canada against Iran.

Various Western media reports compared the incidents to the 1979 takeover of the US embassy in Iran, during which students held embassy staff hostage for over a year. In reality, Tuesday's protests were of an entirely different scale, but nonetheless reflect the escalation of tensions between the Iranian regime and the major powers, led by the US.

The British government quickly seized upon the incidents to intensify the conflict with Iran. Prime Minister David Cameron on Tuesday denounced the protests as "outrageous and indefensible" and warned of "serious consequences" for Iran. On Wednesday, Foreign Secretary William Hague announced the withdrawal of British embassy staff from Iran and ordered the closure of the Iranian embassy in London within 48 hours. Hague said Britain was not severing diplomatic relations, but said they were at their lowest level.

Tuesday's protests at Britain's compounds were held on the anniversary of the murder of Dr. Majid Shahriari, a leading nuclear scientist whom the Iranian regime alleges was killed by operatives of the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad. Demonstrators numbered only a few hundred, but Western media reports claimed that members of the pro-government Basij militia were involved.

At the British embassy, a few dozen protesters broke away from the main group, climbed over the security fence, entered the compound and opened the gates. They reportedly ransacked offices, burnt documents and set a car on fire. Another group of protesters broke into a compound in northern Tehran that houses embassy staff. Iranian police reportedly did little to prevent the protesters from entering the compounds, but regained control of the situation on

Tuesday evening.

Whatever their exact size and character, the protests certainly express far broader sentiments among ordinary Iranians whose living standards have been hit by the sanctions already imposed. Many people are outraged by Washington's hypocrisy in denouncing Iran while unconditionally backing Israel, the only nuclear weapons-armed state in the Middle East.

At the urging of Britain and the US, the 15-member UN Security Council on Tuesday immediately issued a statement condemning the incidents "in the strongest terms." UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon issued a statement the next day, saying he was "shocked and outraged."

On Wednesday, the speaker of Iran's parliament, Ali Larijani, accused the UN Security Council of being "hasty" in condemning Iran. He said the Iranian parliament was calling for calm, but it believed Britain and the United States were "seeking to exploit" the embassy storming.

Last Sunday, the Iranian parliament passed a bill to downgrade diplomatic relations with Britain and expel the British ambassador from Tehran in response to far-reaching sanctions announced the previous week.

The pretext for the sanctions was a November 8 report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which claimed that the Iranian regime's nuclear energy program might have a military dimension. The report was substantially based on information from foreign intelligence sources—in particular from the US and Israel. In addition, much of the material dated back to 2003.

Under the tougher sanctions, the Cameron government has effectively broken all remaining ties between the British and Iranian financial sectors. It invoked counter-terrorism

legislation from 2008 to prohibit financial institutions in the UK from carrying out transactions with Iranian banks and businesses, unless specifically licensed by the treasury.

The Obama administration designated Iran's entire financial sector as a "primary money laundering concern" under the "counter-terrorism" provisions of the notorious Patriot Act. An executive order also gave the US administration the power to impose sanctions on companies that provide goods and services to Iran's oil, gas and petrochemical sectors. Washington has launched a global campaign to encourage other states to take similar measures.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described the US sanctions as a "significant ratcheting up of pressure on Iran." Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner warned: "Financial institutions around the world should think hard about doing business with Iran." Under the sanctions, the US can take punitive action against foreign as well as American banks and corporations.

According to reports in the international business media, the sanctions are beginning to have the "enormous bite" that President Barack Obama boasted of last month. Bloomberg reported this week: "It is becoming harder for Iran to get paid for its oil as the United States tightens financial sanctions to keep buyers from the world's third largest crude exporter."

Obama's measures were nevertheless criticised by sections of the US media for "not going far enough." A *Washington Post* editorial entitled, "More half-measures from Obama administration on Iran," denounced the administration for stopping short of placing direct sanctions on Iran's central bank or moving to block Iranian oil exports.

Republican Senator Mark Kirk and Democratic Senator Robert Menendez have proposed an amendment to the defence bill that directly targets Iran's central bank for sanctions. On Monday, the Senate voted for the amendment to be given consideration and it may be voted on as early as this week.

Candidates in the Republican primaries for the 2012 US presidential election have made bellicose statements calling for confrontation with the Iranian regime. During a recent candidates' debate, former House of Representatives speaker Newt Gingrich declared: "If we were serious we could break the Iranian regime" within a year by "cutting off the gasoline supply to Iran and then, frankly, sabotaging the

only refinery they have."

The Israeli government likewise dismissed the sanctions as "not enough." Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called for the major powers to directly target Iran's central bank and step up sanctions on the petrochemical industry. Leaked reports in the Israeli press early last month indicated that Netanyahu has been campaigning within the Israeli cabinet for a pre-emptive military attack on Iran.

The EU has reportedly agreed to sanction some 200 Iranian companies, individuals and organisations. European Council President Herman Van Rompuy met with Obama on Monday and issued a joint statement expressing "deep concern" over Iran's nuclear program, raising the possibility of "additional measures" against the Iranian regime.

France, which is not a major importer of Iranian oil, issued a statement calling for "new sanctions on an unprecedented scale," including freezing the assets of the Iranian central bank and putting an embargo on Iranian oil. The Sarkozy regime initially appeared to be announcing a unilateral embargo on Iranian oil, but later backtracked and said it would take action only in consultation with the EU. While Britain is reportedly supportive of the proposal, Spain and Italy, the largest importers of Iranian crude, are likely to oppose it.

Russia, which has acquiesced in imposing previous sanctions on Iran, has bluntly opposed further punitive measures. Russian foreign ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich denounced the latest sanctions as "unacceptable" and "contradictory to international law." China and Turkey have also opposed additional UN penalties.

The US and its closest allies are nevertheless pushing ahead, exploiting the nuclear issue to ramp up the already intense economic pressure on the Iranian government. The real aim of this campaign is to fashion a regime in Tehran that is more amenable to Washington's ambitions for hegemony in the energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East that Iran sits astride.



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