**Iran: You want targeted sanctions; we’ll give you targeted sanctions**

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Iran responded to the West's targeted sanctions campaign against its military elites Monday with a targeted sanction of its own, barring two nuclear inspectors employed by the International Atomic Energy Agency from traveling to Iran to monitor the country's nuclear program.

The move -- announced today by Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization -- represents a calibrated escalation in Iran's nuclear standoff with the West: not provocative enough to trigger a fifth round of Security Council sanctions, but recalcitrant enough to send a clear signal of its mounting displeasure with the U.N.'s nuclear inspection regime.

"This is highly symbolic; it looks great back home," said an official based in Vienna, where the IAEA headquarters is located. But "Iran has limited leverage; it is already providing only minimal cooperation to the IAEA."

Iran's relationship with the U.N. nuclear agency has become increasingly strained in recent months. The IAEA's director general, Yukiya Amano, has pursued a far more aggressive approach to Iran's nuclear program than his predecessor, Mohamed El-Baradei of Egypt.

Since his appointment as IAEA chief in December, Amano has repeatedly criticized Tehran for its failure to cooperate. In May, at the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty conference, which was attended by Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Amano used his speech to personally accuse Iran of failing to "provide the necessary cooperation" needed to verify its nuclear intentions. For its part, Iran has increasingly accused the IAEA of serving the interests of the West. Iran's parliament has also called for the adoption of a bill that would end entirely Tehran's cooperation with the Vienna-based nuclear agency.

Iran's action appears intended to serve as a reprisal against the United States and Europe for imposing sanctions on Iran, according to observers. The U.S. and its allies have been pressing Iran to increase cooperation with the IAEA inspectors. In practice, the decision to block the two inspectors will have little impact on the IAEA's effort to monitor Iran's program, underscoring Tehran's limited leverage in responding to the West's sanctions push.

"This is a pretty moderate response compared with that Iran said they were prepared to do," saidDavid Albright, president of the Institute for Science and International Security. "They are trying to weaken the inspections without engaging in an open violation of the safeguards agreement. But this is pretty mild stuff."

Salehi accused the two inspectors -- whose identities remain unknown -- of producing "untruthful" reports on Iran's nuclear activities and leaking "false information" to the press. The "two inspectors of the IAEA presented false reports on Iran's nuclear activities," Salehi said. "We called for banning their arrival in Iran for inspections." Salehi said his government "has asked the IAEA to assign to new officials for further inspections."

The Iranian action is perfectly legal under Iran's inspection agreement, although the nuclear agency can raise the issue with its board of governors if it impedes its work. Four years ago, Iran barred the U.N. nuclear agency's top centrifuges experts from traveling to Iran to monitor its program. In 2007, Iran banned three inspectors from working in Iran. The IAEA simply replaced them with new inspectors, and it is likely to do so in this case.

The current dispute involves a pair of inspections at the Jaber Ibn Hayan Multipurpose Research Laboratory in Tehran. On January 9, two IAEA inspectors observed a system that Iranian scientists said was used to study "the electrochemical production of uranium metal." During a follow-up visit in April, the inspectors detected that a component known as an electrochemical cell had been removed. Electrochemical cells potentially have military, as well as civilian, applications.

Earlier this month, Iran wrote to the IAEA to complain that the two inspectors were wrong, and that no device had gone missing. They called for the removal of the two inspectors from the list of approved U.N. nuclear experts allowed into the country. The IAEA's Amano backed the two inspectors' findings in a May report to the IAEA board.

"The IAEA has full confidence in the professionalism and impartiality of the inspectors concerned," he wrote. He also said the May report challenged by Iran "is fully accurate."