

Why Isn't the U.S. Selling Iran iPhones?

Written by Zachary Keck

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ZACHARY KECK, JUL 21 2012

In a moving and insightful op-ed that appeared in the *New York Times*, the National Iranian-American Council's Jamal Abdi recounts a number of recent incidents where Apple stores in the United States refused to sell Iranian-Americans their products because of U.S. sanctions that prohibit exporting or traveling to Iran with smart phones or computer products including tablets. Some misinformed Apple employees interpreted this to mean that they personally should refuse to sell these products to people speaking Farsi (Persian) despite the fact that most of the ones in Abdi's article are Americans.

Abdi's piece is mainly about the civil rights implications of these incidents. Although this aspect of the issue is certainly the most important, Abdi does a fine job of covering it and I see little I could add to the subject. On the other hand, I'd like to discuss another angle to this story that Abdi only briefly touches upon: the policy issues.

Specifically, the sanctions on smart phones and computers in Iran is as clear-cut a case of any where the actual act of imposing sanctions becomes self-perpetuating and divorced from the policy objectives they were initially adopted to achieve. In every conceivable way, the U.S. ought to welcome these products being used in Iran.

To begin with, as Abdi notes in passing, these technologies could help empower Iranians wishing to challenge their government. Although historical examples abound of innovations in information and communication facilitating opposition movements, one needn't look any further than the Iranian protests that followed the disputed 2009 Presidential election. More evidence comes from the extraordinary lengths the Iranian government is going to control this technology in the wake of those protests.

Few issues unite Mitt Romney the U.S. foreign policy establishment more than the desirability of the Iranian people overthrowing the Islamic Republic. Indeed, barely a day goes by where some pundit, scholar, or politician doesn't call on the White House to increase its support for Iran's domestic opposition, or anti-regime exile groups that Iranians despise. Even though some Congress members remained committed to Iranians dying in a plane crash, The Democrat-controlled U.S. Senate, on the other hand, recently passed a bill that would impose sanctions on any entity that sells the Iranian government technologies that could facilitate censorship, blocking communication mediums, or suppressing protestors.

It is quite peculiar, then, that Washington itself is simultaneously supporting Iran's censorship agencies by trying to deny information technology to the Iranian people. We can only hope that the bill's language has been written carefully enough as to avoid the U.S. government having to sanction itself if the bill becomes law.

One can foresee those who support the ban on IT exports to Iran countering that these technologies, if allowed into Iran, would surely fall into the hands of the Iranian government, who could use them for ill. Initially, this explanation might appear to be somewhat more logical than that of not giving ordinary Iranians iPhones. In fact, it is even more wrong-headed.

To begin with, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) maintains extensive smuggling networks through the world to ferry weapons and other illicit items. The idea that the Iranian government couldn't easily tap these networks to gain access to readily available consumer products like iPhones and iPads is pure fantasy.

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More importantly, though, is that the U.S. ought to hope Iranian government officials make use of these devices, given that the U.S. has remarkably effective Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) capabilities and a proven record of success. Indeed, soon after carrying out his first attack on an American target, the two African embassy bombings in 1998, Osama bin Laden permanently stopped using a satellite phone in order to evade detection. The problem with this, of course, is that it is remarkably hard to manage a dispersed terrorist network without this technology. Consequently, many of al-Qaeda's mid-level commanders not as well-versed in operational security, continued to use pre-paid cell phones and email even after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. And, according to Peter Bergen, the United States seized upon their use of these devices in tracking down most of the al-Qaeda operatives and commanders that were arrested in Pakistani cities in the initial years after 9/11.

The U.S. has also had great success in using SIGINT capabilities to gather intelligence on Iran's nuclear activities. Most notably, the U.S. intelligence community's shocking conclusion in 2007 that Iran had not restarted its nuclear weapons program turned out to be based heavily on the intercepted phone and email communications of senior Iranian nuclear scientists. This is merely one example. As David Sanger and common sense tell us, the U.S. has likely used SIGINT and cyber capabilities to gather hordes of useful information on Iran and its nuclear program.

Thus, the U.S. has a strong interest in seeing the Iranian government becoming more "wired." And if the Iranian government is going to be "wired," it is certainly to the United States' advantage that it use devices Washington has ready access to in order to test ways to penetrate them.

So, all of this begs the question, "Why isn't the U.S. selling Iran iPhones and iPads?" A number of possibilities exist but my money's with the Beltway's new industry being to blame.

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