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Iran turns from dollar to euro in oil sales

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Iran is selling more of its oil for payment in euros than dollars as it seeks to shift its foreign currency reserves away from the depreciating currency of its political enemy, the United States.

The world's fourth-biggest oil exporter has inserted a clause in its oil contracts allowing it to request payment in alternative currencies.

Gholanhossein Nozari, the managing director of National Iranian Oil Company, said that 57 per cent of Iran's income from oil exports was now received in euros.

The move reflects a political desire for less reliance on the dollar, as well as a need to avoid further depreciation in currency reserves. Iran's dollar holdings are thought to have fallen from 40 per cent of currency reserves to just a third.

Iran announced plans in 2004 to develop an Iranian oil bourse, a commodity exchange that would become a Middle Eastern rival to the major exchanges in New York, London and Singapore, which set benchmark oil prices.

The Iranian bourse would also challenge the petrodollar by setting oil prices in euros. However, there has been little progress in establishing the bourse, which failed to launch as planned last March.

A spokesman for National Iranian Oil Company said that the switch to euros for oil payments would not affect the pricing of Iranian oil. "Our oil contracts are still based on the dollar because the international market assessments are in US dollars," he said.

Iran's decision to switch currencies extends a trend among big oil exporters moving from the dollar as they seek protection from a continuing slide in the petrocurrency's value. In October Russia said it would diversify its currency reserves into Japanese yen. Overall, Russia is believed to have let its dollar holdings slip and they are now equal with euros.

The dollar's slide protected non-dollar oil importers from the escalation in the price of fuel early this year. Oil was \$63 per barrel at the beginning of January, rose to \$74 at the start of July and has fallen back to \$63 per barrel this month. However, translated into euros, the rise is less impressive — from €53 a barrel to a peak of €58 before a sharp decline to €48.

The fall in the dollar against major currencies has had a dramatic impact on the revenues of oil exporters and has exacerbated the rumbling anti-American feeling in the Gulf.

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Although Gulf Arab states are predominantly dollar export earners, they mainly purchase in euros and yen, buying food, consumer goods and manufactured products from Europe and the Far East.

In March the United Arab Emirates said that it would switch 10 per cent of its currency reserves from dollars to euros, a decision that closely followed the attempt by the US Congress to block the acquisition by Dubai Ports World of a number of ports in the United States.

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