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Iran: “Snapping Back” Sanctions and the Threat of War

During his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, President George W. Bush named Iran as one of three countries forming an “axis of evil.” The other two were North Korea and Iraq. According to Bush and his neocon backers, these three nations posed a threat to our security and the security of our allies. They “sponsor terror” and are actively seeking or already in possession of weapons of mass destruction with which to “threaten world peace.”

Since the overthrow of the Shah in 1979 when the Islamic Republic of Iran was established, Iran has been a target of US destabilization efforts in the form of sanctions and support for armed opposition groups seeking regime change. (One such group—*Mujahedeen Khalq*, or MEK, a known terrorist group—has the blessings and backing of John Bolton, the recently appointed National Security Advisor and an avid supporter of regime change.)

In 2015 the five permanent members of the Security Council (US, UK, France, Russia, and China) and Germany concluded negotiations with Iran on a deal that would lift sanctions on Iran in exchange for that country’s suspension of its nuclear program. Called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), this landmark agreement marked an easing of tensions between the parties involved and the triumph of diplomacy over force or the threat of force. And for the people of Iran, the lifting of sanctions promised relief from the poverty sanctions had caused. Washington attributes the success of negotiations to the efficacy of severe economic pressure. According to [Trita Parsi](#), former president of

the National Iranian American Council (NIAC), officials in the Obama administration publicized the myth that “crippling sanctions brought the Iranian regime to its knees, forcing it to rush to the negotiating table to beg for mercy.” For Parsi, this conclusion is questionable at best. (Alert: According to the [Iran Lobby](#) website, many Iranian Americans believe Parsi is an “intellectually dishonest regime apologist and an unofficial and unregistered lobbyist for the Iranian regime.”)

In Parsi’s view, Iran’s “more conciliatory policy towards the West” reflected the influence of a “pragmatic faction with the Iranian government.” Even before Obama had imposed sanctions, Iran had offered the West its own proposals for a nuclear settlement. In the end, both sides were willing to compromise, and the result was a deal that let the world breathe a little easier—until Donald Trump in 2018 chose to scrap the deal and re-impose sanctions, despite Iran’s near-universally recognized compliance with the terms of the agreement and its obvious success in averting war.

[Parsi explains](#): “Trump’s strategy seems designed to fail. Instead of a Plan B aimed at securing Iran’s capitulation, it appears designed to pave the way for Plan C: War.” Those who praise the role of sanctions in forcing Iran to renounce its goal of becoming a nuclear power invariably fail to consider the humanitarian consequences of a policy that seeks to cripple Iran’s economy. In Iraq, the 13-year economic embargo brought nothing but misery and death to the Iraqi people while strengthening the regime. Only after the US and UK invaded Iraq in 2003 and toppled the regime were sanctions rescinded.

Unilateral and multilateral sanctions on Iran have a three-decades-long history; they were originally implemented to resolve the standoff between Iran and the West over the issue of Iran’s nuclear program. In addition to the US, the European Union, the UN Security Council, and other countries have also imposed sanctions on Iran. The JCPOA in 2015 was welcomed as an opportunity for Iran to return to the fold of the global economy and to reinvigorate its own economy. Trump with the stroke of a pen has sabotaged that possibility and consigned the Iranian people to ever more suffering with the “snap back” of unilateral US sanctions.

So what exactly have international economic sanctions on Iran accomplished so far? Former Secretary of State and presidential contender [Hillary Clinton](#) assured the world that the only goal of sanctions was to pressure the government “without contributing to the suffering of ordinary Iranians.” Yes, there are exceptions for food and medicine and other humanitarian necessities. But former Vice President [Joe Biden](#) called them the “most crippling sanctions in the history of sanctions.” Like Iraq, Iran greatly depends on oil

revenues to help keep its economy afloat. One-fifth of Iran's export economy is dependent on oil sales. (In Iraq, before the implementation of the Oil-for-Food deal in 1996, Iraq's economy collapsed because of the freeze on oil sales. Only government food rations prevented widespread starvation.)

Joy Gordon is the author of *Invisible War*, a book about the humanitarian crisis caused by Iraq sanctions. In 2013, writing about Iran, she emphasized the importance of oil to Iran's economy and its ability to provide services to the people: "The oil industry ... generates 80 percent of Iran's income from foreign exchange. The oil industry also generates about 50% of government revenue, which impacts not only Iran's military, but also the rest of Iran's governmental functions, including education and health care."

In the case of Iran, the restoration of sanctions will occur in stages. Sanctions on the export of Iranian oil and petroleum products will begin on November 5, 2018. There are already restrictions on Iran's purchase of US currency, and its ability to trade in gold and precious metals. As a consequence of these and other restrictions, the local currency—the Iranian rial—is losing most of its purchasing power (since 2010, it has lost two-thirds of its value against the US dollar), while the price of consumer goods is doubling. On top of these changes, the cost of imported drugs has risen by 40-50%. The government's monthly cash allowance "buys less than \$4 worth of goods because the official exchange rate has not been adjusted," according to [Shashank Bengali](#), a *Los Angeles Times* South Asia correspondent.

By far, the most damaging effect of sanctions has been their impact on Iran's healthcare system. Severely reduced oil revenues mean less money to invest in national health programs, and this decline is directly related to critical shortages of medicines, medical supplies, and medical devices. Journalist [Bethan McKernan](#), reporting from Beirut on August 23, 2018, noted that "For ordinary Iranians, the brief optimism created by the 2015 international nuclear deal has evaporated, and many are now fearful of the future."

For veteran administration hardliner John Bolton, "The re-imposition of sanctions, we think, is already having a significant effect on Iran's economy and on, really, popular opinion inside Iran." That certainly seems to be the case as millions of Iranian citizens are paying the price of American hubris. In her report, McKernan points out that "More than 80 million ordinary citizens [are] feeling the pinch as [the] rial tumbles, food prices and rent soar and supplies of vital imported medicines begin to run out."

McKernan quotes [Jamal Abdi](#), the current president of the National Iranian American Council, who says, "The grievous harm sanctions cause the Iranian people cannot be

overstated. As the economy and unemployment levels make daily life unbearable for millions of Iranians, families are choked off from life-saving medicines and starved of critical infrastructure.” Many would likely agree with Abdi’s conclusion that sanctions on Iran amount to “collective punishment,” while the government remains immune to their impact.

In 2018 an Iranian writer with the pseudonym “[Pedestrian](#)” published an account of life under sanctions on *Catapult*, an online magazine. The following excerpts are from her article:

Our cities, villages, and hospitals have become embargoed regions, as our bodies are sealed in slab after slab of red tape. By adopting the seemingly neutral language of economics and law, sanctions legitimize dehumanization. It becomes acceptable to deny a people technology, medicine and aid.

As sanctions have grown harsher over the years, those suffering from rare or complicated diseases have been the first to bear the consequences. After 2010, the Iranian Blood Transfusion Organization (IBTO) which had purchased Hemophilia testing kits from European companies, had to close testing centers across the country. Europe was no longer willing to supply Iran, and IBTO could not meet demand.

Nurses and hospital staff still tell stories of drug scarcity between 2010 and 2014, as if recalling a nightmare. They’d send out parents of cancer stricken children to purchase medicine, knowing full well that they would return empty-handed. In theory, sanctions were to be waived for humanitarian aid. But in reality, as financial transactions with Iran were restricted, it became impossible to purchase pharmaceuticals and other goods.

Drugs were only available on the black market at sky-high prices. One aging caretaker at the hospital told me in 2012 that he had stressed to his wife that if he ever had an illness, she should lay him down in a corner of the house and let him die. That the costs and burden of treatment were too high to be worth it: “She should only have to pay for my burial.”

In the opinion of this author, sanctions are not a benign alternative to war; they *are* war by other means, using economic pressure to strangle the targeted country’s economy. If regime change is the ultimate goal of sanctions, then one way to accomplish this, without committing military forces, is to make life so unbearable for citizens of the targeted country they take matters into their own hands by rising up against their government. It didn’t work in Iraq, and it is highly unlikely to work in Iran. Granted, there are cases when sanctions are a necessary and justifiable means to achieve certain ends—such as the

dissolution of the apartheid system in South Africa. In the case of South Africa, the people themselves, in solidarity with the international community, called for sanctions to end an unjust system.

Iran, however, is a different story. Given the unpredictability of the Trump administration, it may be that the president's decision to pull out of the nuclear deal signals the first step on a path leading to full-scale war. So far, the European Union, Russia, and China, signatories to the deal, are not onboard with Trump's attempt to build a coalition in support of sanctions. If instead of regime change, the goal of sanctions is to force Iran to renounce its nuclear program and get a "better deal," then economic pressure—favored by Trump, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, National Security Adviser John Bolton, and other hardliners in the administration—is a doomed strategy. In April 2015, [President Obama](#) admitted that "Iran has shown no willingness to eliminate those aspects of their [nuclear] program that they maintain are for peaceful purposes, even in the face of unprecedented sanctions."

Iranians may despise the theocracy in Tehran that overshadows their lives, and blame part of their suffering on government incompetence and corruption, but their frustration and anger, according to former NIAC president [Trita Parsi](#), "doesn't automatically translate into an embrace of Trump's policies."