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US Imperial Sanctions, the Siege and Terrorism

By Stephen Gowans

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In his 2011 book *Crisis in Korea: America, China and the Risk of War*, Tim Beal writes,

The Americans, and their friends and allies, tend to have a disengaged attitude toward sanctions—disengaged both ethically and in terms of causality. Sanctions are, after all, but the modern version of the age-old military tactic of the siege. The aim of the siege is to reduce the enemy to such a state of starvation and deprivation that they open the gates, perhaps killing their leaders in the process, and throw themselves on the mercy of the besiegers.”

Later, Beal adds, “There are strong parallels between sanctions/sieges and terrorism: both inflict pain on ordinary, vulnerable people in order to turn them against their leaders...”

While Beal writes in connection with North Korea, Washington’s use of the modern-day siege extends to other countries, as well. Like North Korea, Iran is despised by Washington for its insistence on using its labour, markets and natural resources, not for Wall Street’s profits, but for self-directed development. And like North Korea, Iran is menaced by a campaign of sanctions. These sanctions, too, aim, as terrorism does, to make ordinary people suffer so they’ll pressure their government to change its policies to accommodate the interests of the besieger/terrorist (in this case, to replace the current economically nationalist government with one that will open the Iranian economy to ownership by foreigners and create business conditions favorable to foreign investors reaping handsome returns, albeit under the guise of building “democracy” and relinquishing an independent nuclear energy industry.)

The accustomed practice in mainstream journalism is to gloss over the effects of sanctions on besieged countries, or to insist that they're targeted at a country's leadership and therefore do no harm to ordinary people.

But in a March 17 Washington Post article, reporters Joby Warrick and Anne Gearan acknowledge that the sanctions on Iran are aimed at hurting ordinary people.

Warrick and Gearan write,

Harsh economic sanctions have taken a serious toll on Iran's economy, but U.S. and European officials acknowledge that the measures have not yet produced the kind of public unrest that could force Iranian leaders to change their nuclear policies.

Nine months after Iran was hit with the toughest restrictions in its history, the nation's economy appears to have settled into a slow, downward glide, hemorrhaging jobs and hard currency but appearing to be in no immediate danger of collapse, Western diplomats and analysts say.

At the same time, the hardships have not triggered significant domestic protests or produced a single concession by Iran on its nuclear program.

They continue,

The impact has been hardest on the middle and working classes, which have seen savings evaporate and purchasing power dry up. Yet, in recent months, Iran's fiscal crisis appears to have eased, and economists say neither complete collapse nor widespread rioting appears likely in the near term.

So, sanctions aren't working because they haven't inflicted enough suffering to engender widespread unrest and rioting.

If sanctions do produce their desired effect, and wide-spread rioting does break out, the public unrest most assuredly will not be blamed by Western reporters on the suffering produced by sanctions, but dishonestly on Tehran's "economic mismanagement." And aid will continue to flow to opposition forces in Iran, who will be presented as "thirsting for democracy" (rather than relief from the suffering inflicted by the United States and European Union) to help them topple their government (which is to say, open the gate to let the besiegers in.)

The Warrick and Gearan article's emphasis on the sanctions' failure to promote rioting, may signal that policy-makers are coming to the conclusion that Washington's goals for Iran cannot be achieved by sanctions alone, and that military intervention is also required.

Military intervention, however, may not be an alternative to the siege, but its complement. US Air Force Lt. General Michael Short's explanation of the objectives of the 1999 US-led NATO air war on the former Yugoslavia resonates with the aim of the besieger/terrorist. Explained Short,

"If you wake up in the morning and you have no power to your house and no gas to your stove and the bridge you take to work is down and will be lying in the Danube for the next 20 years, I think you begin to ask, 'Hey, Slobo, what's this all about? How much more of this do we have to withstand?'" ("What this war is really about," The Globe and Mail (Toronto), May 26, 1999.)

The modus operandi, then, of US foreign policy is to inflict pain on ordinary people who live in countries whose governments resist integration into the US-superintended system of global capitalist exploitation, in order to create public unrest that will either force the country's leaders to change their policies, or step down and yield power to local representatives of global capitalist interests (deceptively labelled by Western state officials and establishment journalists as "pro-democracy" or "democratic" forces.)

The only thing "democratic" about US foreign policy is its insistence on democratizing suffering.