The Myth of Benign Sanctions

written by Ali Fathollah-Nejad | July 5, 2013

They aim to bring recalcitrant tyrants to their senses, to put an end to their external as well as internal malefaction. With surgical precision, they pull the noose ever closer around the tyrant's neck, so that in hopeless despair he is compelled to behave reasonably in foreign affairs while, enfeebled, he lifts his bloodied hands from the throat of the oppressed people. It is a morally justified decapitation of evil, the salutary removal of a swelling tumor.

Undoubtedly, in this description sanctions are an extremely attractive option to do twice as well at a single stroke: The culprit is hunted down, right up to the tyrannicide, and the maltreated people are freed and released on to the path of democracy.

When it comes to Iran, debates revolve around a dual axis of war or peace, of dictatorship or democracy. Sanctions, it is implicitly assumed, are akin to peace and democracy. At a minimum, it is said, they constitute a necessary evil in order to put the tyrant in chains, and prevent him from completely unleashing his brutality, both externally and internally.

This is how the motivation for and the functioning of sanctions are portrayed within the dominant discourse. In short, sanctions are civilization's magic cure against barbarity. Viewed in this light, they fascinate political circles in the West and even parts of the Iranian diaspora. And not seldom, even the most enlightened intellectuals of the Western world are spellbound by the rosy rhetoric of their political leaders, leading many of them to content themselves with simply calling for a targeted and therefore effective application of sanctions to kill the tyrant and free the people.

Thus lifted onto this sacrosanct level, the rejection of sanctions is branded as complicity with the tyrant — a refusal to "tame" him.

Forming a central part of the debate surrounding Iran, the Western public is afforded the dubious luxury of relying on rhetoric rather than reality when assessing sanctions. In the face of that fantastic image of sanctions, a serious discussion about their extent and impact is flagrantly missing. However, if one takes the trouble to take a look behind the glittery façade of the righteous global policeman whose noble aim is to bring the evildoer down on his knees by way of sanctions, the sheer negative image of this very picture cuts the surface.

The Imposers' Mindset

"Unprecedented sanctions" against Iran are imposed, it echoes with an unmistakable sense of pride from the capital cities of the Western world. After all, the self-appointed "leaders of the free world" all have acquired a rather dubious specialization in designing and implementing a plethora of various kinds of economic sanctions, deployed to discipline the unruly tyrants of the Global South.

The automatic recourse to sanctions by Western policy-makers (most recently at the start of the Syrian crisis) is not only an expression of their perplexity and their delusional belief that you can meet a complex problem with a supposedly universal magic cure. Such desperate activism à la "Let's

do something" also unites these policy-makers with some Iranians, yet none of them contemplating the consequences of their sanctions policy or advocacy. At the same time, there is a moral superiority on display: After all, sanctions would represent an almost peace-loving antithesis to the crude use of force, they are at the least a means to avert war — but in any case they aim, in a targeted and intelligent fashion, at the Achilles' heel of the tyrant.

Also, some policy-makers want us to believe that the never-ending tightening of sanctions reflected their paternal patience with which the democracies dealt with the evil opponent, in their noble aim to prevent the mad mullahs rushing to the bomb. These same politicians have all along displayed the apodictic certainty that Iranians would ultimately blame their own government for their economic malaise — in the improbable case this would not happen, the sanctions policy ought to be better "explained" to the Iranians, they insist. What does such a belief structure reveal about our appreciation of Iranians' cognitive capability to adequately direct the blame for their increasingly desolate economic situation to either the pillages of a kleptocratic regime or the sanctions of the Western imposers?[1]

Crippling Economic Coercion

The Western-led sanctions regime against Iran, with its now virtually all-out financial and trade embargo, has since its qualitative leap in the course of the so-called nuclear crisis of the past decade, always been by its very design not aimed at a tyrannicide of any kind. On the contrary, as one of its main proponents has stated, "[Iran] must know that the West will work tirelessly to make Iran poor […]."[2] These sanctions, routinely called "targeted" but now self-assuredly called "crippling," have long been rather crippling than targeted when it came to their impact upon the Iranian economy. In this respect, the country's unparalleled isolation from the international financial system has constituted the eye of the storm, which wreaked havoc in even the most indubitably civilian sectors of Iran's economy. The financial exclusion is precisely the reason why purely non-military items, most dramatically a great deal of life-saving medicine, cannot be purchased any longer. And, by the way, mind you that we can witness a stark case of "double-punishment," namely when it comes to the tens, if not hundreds of thousands of Iranian victims of Saddam's chemical warfare of the 1980s who are now deprived of vital medicine due to the sanctions imposed by the very same countries who were back then the providers of those chemical weapons. Imagine, for a second, how each of them and their families might feel in the current situation.

The neutral-sounding technocratic term "sanctions" veils its true significance as a means of economic coercion.[3] Does it likewise concern us in the slightest that international law can hardly be reconciled with the economic strangulation of an entire nation?[4] In an age in which illegal wars of aggression, politically and morally disguised as "humanitarian interventions," or likewise illegal drone attacks camouflaged as intelligent and clean police operations, have almost become the business of the day for Western democracies, warfare by economic means falls under the radar of public awareness. And when noticed sanctions are even thought of as a benign gesture in comparison to the military prowess that can be unleashed upon a country and the people inhabiting it.

The Trojan Horse Carrying the "Magic Box"

But how come that for too long a time many have accepted the deployment of this economic weapon of mass destruction? What further rhetorical tools are used to justify the imposition of crippling sanctions?

To maintain the moral high-ground, at each and every round of ever-tightening sanctions

Western leaders hasten to highlight that the measures adopted are not aimed at the people of Iran who, they never fail to add, deserve a better life than under the present regime. This implies that Iranians in turn somehow deserve the Western sanctions being proffered to them by a caring Uncle Sam to alleviate their misery and desperation, and to revitalize their hopes and aspirations. Many, including some Iranians themselves, have long bought into the rhetoric of the sanctions' imposers that the economic measures will boost the people's standing against a handicapped tyrant.

Asked what the sanctions entail, both representatives from the imposing countries and the proponents of sanctions promptly provide us with a glance into the "magic box" that is deployed in the fight against tyranny: the notorious human-rights violators, the tyrant's accomplices, have been identified and placed on an ever-expanding blacklist that prohibits them from travelling abroad and from accessing their international bank accounts; means of repression and control used by the tyrant against dissent are not sold to him anymore (at least not officially by the West). Finally, to paralyze the tyrant's external aggression, the provision of so-called dual-use items, i.e. items that also have a military purpose, are banned.

Rarely, someone will ask about the real utility and efficacy of such measures in alleviating the repression dissident Iranians are exposed to: What is the use of prohibiting someone to travel beyond the region who nearly never does so? Has the tyrant been so naive as not to recognize that he can purchase the same instruments of repression from a panoply of willful sellers on a globalized market? Do we care that the vast majority of items banned under the "dual-use" rubric are in fact used for civilian purposes? As in the cases of the "dual-use" items prohibited from getting into Iraq yesterday and into Gaza today, they constitute the most basic goods needed by various sectors of the civilian economy.

If the usefulness of such measures is next to negligible, so is there no point whatsoever to this "magic box"? While all the above-mentioned restrictions may well be morally justified, the key point is that its contents reflect only a very tiny percentage of the entire sanctions package that overwhelmingly has nothing to do with those measures enlisted and proudly enunciated.

However, because of the severity of the situation that has come about as a result of these sanctions, for over a year this Trojan Horse argument can no longer be sold with the ease that it used to be. The reason is that Iranians inside and outside the country have themselves felt the scourge of the sanctions on their everyday life, and begun to comprehend that the measures are by no means targeted but indeed crippling.

Nevertheless, respected figures such as the Iranian Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi (whose tireless commitment for human-rights needs to be commended) and some Western-based human-rights organizations (such as Justice For Iran) keep on feeding the Trojan Horse argument by incessantly calling for "intelligent" and "targeted sanctions against the regime," thus demanding the senseless and utterly useless growth of that "magic box." After all, is there any evidence to suggest that such demands have in any way benefited the cause of freedom and democracy in Iran? Or, rather, have they provided a cover of legitimacy for the continuation of the sanctions policy in its entirety? As such, one must bitterly admit, some freedom fighters have assumed the role of useful stooges for the economic strangulation of Iranians.

But how may Iranians themselves feel about the "free world's" noble gesture of emphatical goodwill? Did the honorable cavalry of sanctions ever contemplate how it was for those people "who deserved a better life than under the present regime" to actually live in a country that is under a severe sanctions regime? What it felt like, when the cost of rent and basic food stuffs are constantly on the rise; when the country's currency has lost half of its value; when the specter of unemployment is boundlessly rising due to an economy virtually cut off from the ever so vital

international trade; when international banking transactions, be it for personal or commercial purposes, if possible at all, can only be made at much higher fees via an increasingly limited number of third world countries; when every boarding of an aircraft resembles a gamble with your life due to the lack of spare parts; when food supplies from abroad cannot be unloaded because of lack of insurance; and when the stock of life-saving medication and equipment is rapidly depleting, with the specter of a humanitarian crisis clearly emerging on the horizon. This is only a piece of the gigantic dimensions of their "targeted sanctions against the regime." Similar reports from Iran are reaching us at an accelerated rate, day by day; they are accompanied by voices of desperation, people for whom in a repressive system the air to breathe becomes even thinner by way of sanctions.

The People as Hostage: Economic Sanctions and Democratization

The sanctions narrative is predicated upon the idea that there is a positive relationship between sanctions and democratization, for the tyrant is tamed and the people empowered.

Furthermore, there is a silent but nevertheless clearly heard hope that seems to unite Western politicians and some exiled Iranians alike: The economic hardship thanks to the sanctions would direct the people's anger towards the regime and ultimately bring it down in an act of extreme popular resentment. After all, there can be no freedom without sacrifice, echoes the loud heckling from parts of the Iranian diaspora from Los Angeles to London. The price is high but the time has come to pay it, Ramin also invokes on Facebook. Almost spitting, Sara replies, "We are paying the price for our freedom: In case you've missed it, the Evin prison is overcrowded!" Seen from the comfortable SUV in California, this concept which exhibits a fascistic dimension hailing the principle "The greater the suffering, the greater the hope!" may have a certain charm. However, the underlying assumption is that it is acceptable to collectively punish Iranian society for the sake of a greater good — however ill-defined the latter may be.

On the ground, however, there is a connection whose logic we would never dare to doubt within the Western hemisphere: a sustainable and socially just democratic change is dependent not only on the energies of the middle class, but also on the intervention of working people and the poor. It is precisely this middle class, the workers, and the poor that are sanctioned to death in Iran. To put it differently, a person struggling for economic survival barely has the luxury of engaging as a *citoyen* in the struggle for democracy.

Young Iranians, who form the bulk of the population, suffer extremely at the hands of economic sanctions.[5] These are the same people whom the West otherwise has chosen as torchbearers of a future democracy in Iran. Instead of assuming such a role, these same people are subjected to collective punishment.

Iran Sanctions — A Prime Showpiece: Widening the Power Gap Between State and Society

Taking into consideration the academic findings about the impact of sanctions, the Iranian case can potentially qualify as a prime showpiece: authoritarian regimes driven into a corner usually increase their repression against all kinds of opposition and are also able to shift the costs of sanctions onto the population, as a result of which they can prolong their rule.[6] The sanctions-imposing governments can hardly be unaware that entities connected to the ruling system, such as the Revolutionary Guards' economic empire, profit from the sanctions. With legal trade virtually illegalized, the civilian economic sectors across the board are damned to head-shakingly observe how black-channel operations run by powerful circles of corruption and nepotism flourish. Hence, as a precise negative image of the above narrative, the regime can even extend its power vis-à-vis civil society as a result of sanctions.[7]

Aware of such fatal consequences, civil-society representatives from inside Iran have consistently opposed sanctions. The West, which is always boasting of its support for the cause of democracy in Iran, has simply preferred to ignore these voices.

Sanctions Halting Centrifuges:
A Political Fairy-Tale

The pronouncement by the German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle on the occasion of another round of sanctions reflects the prior concern of the West's political class: "The point is that we cannot accept that Iran rushes towards the nuclear bomb." Hardly anyone, however, recalls that since the massive tightening of sanctions in 2006, the number of centrifuges spinning in Iran has more than decupled. It is a fair assumption that in fact the nuclear program has much to do with a sense of uncertainty, for, after all, the country, literally besieged by enemy troops, was ever since threatened with war in the wake of its revolution — a perception that can hardly be extinguished by way of sanctions.[8]

In addition, sanctions aim to force concessions from Iran. Rather than adopting the Western cost-benefit calculation, that is, giving in when the costs of sanctions become unbearable, Iran's leaders react with defiance and proclaim their will to "resist" as long as it would take.[9] Sanctions also feed the regime's propaganda machinery about the malicious West which aims at subjugating the Iranian people.

A very common claim about the success of the sanctions policy gains currency every single time the Western media reports that Iran has agreed to "return" to the nuclear negotiating table. Only as result of the ever-tightening sanctions regime, it is suggested, the stubborn Iranians have agreed to engage in negotiations. However, the truth is that Iran has shown more willingness to talk to the other side than vice versa — remember the Bush/Cheney administration's refusal to talk to so-called "rogue states"?

The Almost Forgotten Iraqi Tragedy,
or A Favorite Tool of Western Policy

It appears as if there has never been the Iraqi tragedy — indeed a historical chapter of utter disgrace for Western civilization. First of all, this does not refer to the criminal invasion and occupation of the country in 2003. It was throughout the 1990s that this erstwhile cradle of civilization was already barbarically destroyed. The sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council and pushed for by Washington and London, were soon thereafter condemned as genocidal by one UN humanitarian coordinator (Denis Halliday) to the next (Hans von Sponeck). Nothing less than the social fabric of Iraq was shattered; food supply, the health and education systems all collapsed, as did the infrastructure.[9] While women and children — the most fragile members of society — suffered the most,[10] the tyrant remained firmly in his seat. It was a "different kind of war" waged against Iraq, as Von Sponeck later chronicled in his book.[11]

Even then, it was said that sanctions would intelligently target the Iraqi leadership while sparing the population; even then, it was about the "credibility" of Western policy facing a danger of utmost proportions. "Sanctions will be there until the end of time, or as long as Saddam lasts," then U.S. President Bill Clinton explained in November 1997. Confronted with the fact that the sanctions had killed half a million Iraqi children, his Secretary of State Madeleine Albright responded with the legendary statement: "I think it's a very hard choice, but we think that the price is worth it." The macabre logic to sacrifice countless lives on the altar of Realpolitik finds a certain resonance today, when Western politicians can hardly hide their joy about ever-stricter sanctions on Iran. Having this in mind, the famous Iranian dissident Akbar Ganji apocalyptically asked: "How many children under

five years will have to die in Iran, which has three times as many inhabitants as Iraq?”[12]

Conclusion: Crippling Sanctions as an Act of Barbarism

The fact that the concept of “targeted” or “smart” sanctions, which is an inextricable feature of the dominant political discourse, has been adopted unaltered and uncritically by the public discourse in general and many intellectuals in particular is a testimony of our complacency, our unwavering belief in the benign nature of any actions taken by the democratic West. It seems as if we prefer a convenient lie to an inconvenient truth. This self-deception is in fact a necessary act, if we seek to keep wagging the moralizing finger, both domestically and internationally.

Most importantly, what does this tell us about our moral constitution, if we are ready to sacrifice entire societies for our purported Realpolitik interests? Thus, in the righteous fight against tyranny, we hide our very own barbarity. For our sanctions are a brutal assault on an entire country and its more than century-old struggle for democracy and self-determination, whose survival has now become dependent on the drip of our incessant and crippling sanctions regime. Tumor-like, the sanctions have infected all areas of Iranian life, acting like a slow poison injected into society.

In a move of Orwellian proportions, the dominant discourse has unhesitatingly turned sanctions into an act of peace. If we unmask that our sanctions discourse is infested by double standards and hypocrisy, the naked truth will be that we are waging an economic war against the people of Iran; that the sanctions are indeed targeted, but rather at the civilian population; and that the sanctions constitute a form of structural violence directed at Iran’s social fabric.

Therefore, two prospects are currently to be feared: either a suffering populace has to battle for sheer survival within a system that has been cemented through the external threat of force and sanctions alike, in an increasingly securitized and militarized polity; or, in the wake of an officially proclaimed policy failure of “targeted sanctions,” the call for “targeted bombs” comes along swiftly, and needless to say, war will bury any prospect for democracy and decent life for decades to come.

So in the end, the entire image of the sanctions as civilization’s magic wand is nothing but an insidious illusion, the sanctions package merely a poisonous mix wrapped in gift paper, the story of a neat and clean tyrannicide nothing but a PR-spun fairy tale. The Iranian experience of the double burden was not long ago expressed by the famous dissident cartoonist Mana Neyestani on the occasion of the imposition of severe unilateral sanctions by the European Union. In that caricature, the EU’s leather shoe steps on the military boots of the regime underneath of which lies the democracy activist crushed into the ground. While the regime only reacts with a meager “ouch,” the now doubly crushed democracy activist yells in direction to the EU: “To hell with your support!”

All in all, the West has put together a narrative with which both itself and the Iranian regime can live; but the people of Iran cannot. We should pose ourselves two honest questions: Does not everybody enjoy the same human and social rights regardless of the political system they live in? And: If sanctions keep tyrants alive, what would happen if they were removed in toto?

Footnotes

*A shorter version of this article (that was initially drafted in late 2011) has been published in the leading intellectual outlet of the German-speaking world, in the “Feuilleton” pages of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on January 3, 2013. It was published in an Arabic translation on *Jadaliyya* (Washington, DC & Beirut: Arab Studies Institute).

1. See e.g. Younis, Mohamed (2013) “Iranians Feel Bite of Sanctions, Blame U.S., Not Own Leaders,” *Gallup*, February 7.

2. Ottolenghi, Emanuele (2010), “Setting the Sanctions Agenda,” The Journal of International Security Affairs, Washington, DC: The Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, No. 18 (Spring), pp. 19-30, here p. 26.

3. See, for example: Carter, Barry E. (2008) , ‘”Economic Coercion,” in: Wolfrum, Rüdiger (ed.*) Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law,* Oxford University Press, last update by September 2009; online version available via www.mpepil.com.

4. “No State may use or encourage the use of economic, political or any other type of measures to coerce another State in order to obtain from it the subordination of the exercise of its sovereign rights or to secure from it advantages of any kind,” UN General Assembly, Resolution 2131 (XX), 21 December 1965, para. 2. The resolution was decided without any vote against and with only one abstention. See also Carter, op. cit., Section 7.

5. Salehi-Isfahani, Djavad (2010) “Iran’s Youth, The Unintended Victims of Sanctions,” Dubai Initiative — Policy Brief, Cambridge, MA: The Dubai Initiative, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

6. For a good introduction, see Parsi, Trita & Bahrami, Natasha (2012) “Blunt Instrument: Sanctions Don’t Promote Democratic Change,” *Boston Review* (online), February 6, 2013.

7. See Fathollah-Nejad, Ali (2013), “Iran’s Civil Society Grappling with a Triangular Dynamic,” in: Aarts, Paul & Cavatorta, Francesco (eds.*) Civil Society in Syria and Iran: Activism in Authoritarian Contexts*, Boulder, CO & London: Lynne Rienner, pp. 39-68.

8. See Parsi, Trita (2012) “How Obama Should Talk to Iran,” *Washington Post*, January 14, 2013.

9. See International Crisis Group (2013) *Spider Web: The Making and Unmaking of Iran Sanctions*, Brussels: International Crisis Group (*Middle East Report*, No. 138, February; Khajehpour, Bijan and Marashi; Reza and Parsi, Trita (2013) “Never Give In and Never Give Up”: The Impact of Sanctions on Tehran’s Nuclear Calculations, Washington, DC: National Iranian American Council (NIAC), March.

10. See Gordon, Joy (2010*), Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

11. On women, see Al-Ali, Nadje (2003) “Women, Gender Relations, and Sanctions in Iraq,” in: Inati, Shams C. (ed) Iraq: Its History, People and Politics, Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.

12. Von Sponeck, Hans-Christof (2006) “*A Different Kind of War: The UN Sanctions Regime in Iraq*,” New York: Berghahn Books.

13. Ganji, Akbar (2011) “Mojâzât-e régime yâ mojâzât-e mardom-e Irân?!” (Penalties for the Regime or the People of Iran?), *Rooz online*, December 8.