

Sanctions Are Destroying Iranian Society

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Economic sanctions are not only shattering the lives of the Iranian people but also strangling Iran's social and cultural development. Iran is headed for a humanitarian catastrophe unless steps are taken to avert it.

For 33 years now, since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran has been the target of US economic sanctions, which have increased in scope and severity over time. The impact of sanctions on populations is not always quantifiable and can be contradictory. Despite their negative impact in isolating and hindering Iran's economic progress, and the tragic loss of life due to the boycott of spare parts for the aging Iranian airline, in so far as necessity is the mother of invention, sanctions in many instances have acted as an impetus for technological progress; and the experience of success and survival through adversity has infused a collective sense of empowerment and self-confidence.

When I was asked in July to talk about the impact of sanctions on Iranian society, the idea was to place some emphasis on the arts and artists. Since then, the reality of the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding as a result of the economic warfare on Iran has shifted the emphasis, by necessity, from the artists to their audience, since it is inconceivable to think of arts separately from the audience at which it is directed.

The current sanctions by the US and the EU, under the pretext of a manufactured dispute over Iran's civilian nuclear programme, are comprehensive sanctions against Iran's economy for inflicting intentional collective punishment. The damage to the economy and the injury inflicted on the lives of the population in all respects is unambiguous and lethal.

Impact on Healthcare

These sanctions, which went into effect at the end of July 2012, target, amongst other things, Iran's banking and export of oil. Export of oil comprises 80 percent of Iran's foreign revenue which finances infrastructural work, social and welfare services, hospitals, schools, universities, state employees' salaries and pensions. The value of Iranian currency has declined by 80 percent in the past year. The prices of imported machinery, medicine, and many types of foodstuff have risen beyond the reach of ordinary people. Many factories and businesses have folded, and unemployment is mounting.

However, the most critical impact of sanctions is on the availability of drugs and the health of the population. Iran is making 97 percent of its needed drugs domestically, and pharmaceuticals are heavily subsidised. The devalued currency means that raw materials imported for drug production are now a lot more expensive. In many cases, the raw material cannot even be paid for because of the banking sanctions, particularly as the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), in compliance with the EU

sanctions has stopped its electronic communication services for Iranian financial institutions and transactions from Iran. As a result, even domestically-produced drugs are becoming unavailable. Two drug manufacturing companies closed this October, and pharmacies are experiencing widespread closures and bankruptcies.

The most advanced life saving drugs cannot be made in generic form. These include drugs for heart disease, lung problems, kidney disease and dialysis, multiple sclerosis, thalassemia, haemophilia and many forms of cancer.

All of the surgeries for thousands of haemophilic patients have been cancelled because a shortage of coagulant drugs. A 15-year-old child died at the end of October due to the absence of coagulant medication. The head of Iran's Haemophilia Society has said, "This is a blatant hostage-taking of the most vulnerable people by countries which claim they care about human rights. Even a few days of delay can have serious consequences like haemorrhage and disability."

The drugs for many forms of cancer, particularly leukaemia, which is rife in Iran, cannot be imported, and this absence of drugs is happening in a context where the number of cancer patients in Iran has risen dramatically. It is predicted that by 2015 there will be a "cancer tsunami" in Iran.

In Iraq, a UNICEF survey estimated that 500,000 children under five had died, as a result of sanctions on the country, between 1991 and 1998. One can presume that by the time of the 2003 invasion, and under deteriorating conditions of poor water sanitation, malnutrition, disease, and the near absence of medication, many more would have died in the entire population. With millions of lives currently at risk in Iran, it is predicted that the death rate there could dwarf the casualties in Iraq.

I was in Iran recently and returned last Tuesday. Whilst there, this dire humanitarian situation was confirmed by medics and chemists with whom I spoke. Also, some students in medical chemistry told me that they can no longer afford the ingredients to make the drugs required for their doctorate work.

The Effect on Culture and Arts

There is no doubt about the direct or indirect detrimental effects of these sanctions on Iranian society at economic, political, social, cultural and artistic levels. I attended the re-launch of the magazine *Danesh va Mardom* (Science and People). The writers, poets, translators, and scientists present there were unanimously concerned about the impact of sanctions. I was told how the price of paper had multiplied more than fivefold. In fact, the publishers syndicate has recently warned that publishing is no longer viable.

The double impact of the devalued currency and financial sanctions have made it very difficult to access scientific and other academic papers to keep abreast with the most recent developments and to have effective scientific and cultural exchanges with those outside of Iran. I heard repeatedly from very bright graduates that there was no prospect for jobs and no budget for research, and that there is an unprecedented flood of "brain drain" out of the country.

An example of a visible impact on the arts is the virtual winding up of the National Symphony Orchestra, which according to its young conductor, Barda Kiaros, has not

practiced and whose musicians have not been paid for over two months. He says that the Tehran Symphony Orchestra too does not receive the recognition it deserves and has not performed the work of great composers in concert for two years.

Abdolhossein Mokhtabaad, a famous composer and traditional singer, commented on the effects of sanctions and expressed the belief that the economic situation is not conducive to arts. He said that artists are not supported and likened artistic work in Iran to the work of a tightrope artist — always walking on a thin line.

For an insecure, debilitated, and hand-to-mouth population, artistic appreciation and artistic expression become a rare luxury, even irrelevant on the hierarchy of their people's priorities. Not only do sanctions destroy the infrastructure for cultural and artistic development, they also create a state of economic and political siege directed at forced regime change, which is intensifying the securitization of Iranian society with dire consequences for civil and political rights, including artistic expression.

The strangulation of Iran's rights and silencing of its voice on the international scene then finds its parallel in the strangulation and silencing of Iranians' rights and voice, including artistic expression, at the domestic level. As in Iraq, sanctions are not only destroying the most vulnerable sections of the population but are devastating and weakening the middle class in Iran as the historical engine for creativity and scientific and cultural progress.

No one amongst the leaders or the grassroots of Iran's legitimate domestic opposition has called for sanctions on Iran. In fact, they have warned that sanctions and war will be the biggest blow to the civil society and democratic aspirations in Iran.

Artistic expressions may defy political repression and economic poverty and find channels and forms of expression, as exemplified by the proud achievements of Iranian cinema. However, there is a tipping point when hardship does not strengthen but destroys the cultural and artistic development, in the long-term and at a societal level.

The economic sanctions on Iran are illegal under the international law and meet the UN definition of genocide. Nonetheless, US Congressman Brad Sherman has said "Critics [of the sanctions] argued that these measures will hurt the Iranian people. Quite frankly, we need to do just that." Similarly, Congressman Gary Ackerman said, "The goal...is to inflict crippling, unendurable economic pain over there." These sentiments to target the population to feel the pain of the sanctions are echoed by other Western statesmen.

The UN Convention on Genocide defines genocide as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such...[including] causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; [and] deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part." How else are we to interpret the sanctions affecting the import of baby milk and tetanus vaccine, and the announcement by Iran's Ministry of Health that Iran's medical drug reserves will run out within two months?

Denis Halliday, who resigned as the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq after 34 years of service for the UN in protest against the impact of economic sanctions on the people of Iraq, described the sanctions as genocidal. Another humanitarian catastrophe and another genocide is now unfolding in Iran. Iranian society and Iranian artists are being strangulated into silence and a collective silent death, unless we intervene boldly in true artistic spirit.

Update:

Iran's Ministry of Health announced on November 30 that with the Central Bank's release of \$130 million of its foreign currency reserves at a relatively cheap emergency exchange rate, the import of urgently-needed pharmaceutical drugs had begun. The Central Bank also agreed to allocate \$1.5 to 2 billion from its foreign currency reserves to cover the pharmaceutical needs of the population for the next year.

The emergency health crisis, however, will only be temporarily abated. On the same day as the announcement of Iran's Ministry of Health on November 30, the US Senate approved another round of draconian sanctions against Iran's economy. These sanctions, which came as an amendment to the US National Defense Authorization Act, further target Iran's ports, shipbuilding, shipping, and energy sectors. In violation of the international trade law, the sanctions also attempt to deplete Iran's foreign currency reserve by penalizing countries who make payments of gold or other precious metals in exchange for Iran's gas and oil, as Turkey did this year when it reportedly paid \$6.4 billion in gold for Iranian natural gas.

*This article is based on a talk presented by independent researcher **Mehrnaz Shahabi** on November 17 at the [Nour Festival of Arts](#) in London, which seeks to celebrate, explore and promote culture and arts in the Middle East and North Africa.*

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