

US Sanctions Have Caused Iranians Untold Misery - And Achieved Nothing

Iranians' stories reflect the devastating human costs of US economic sanctions that are often ignored by Washington's foreign policy elite

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"My young cousin passed away last week," an Iranian Twitter user recently lamented. "She needed medication for her cancer that doctors said can't be found."

The tweet tragically went on: "Maybe she'd be alongside her little daughter now if she had this medicine and not under a pile of cold dirt."

These heartbreaking words are from journalist [Katayoon Lamezadeh](#), one of thousands of Iranians who have taken to social media to speak of how sanctions have upended their lives. Their stories reflect the devastating human costs of US economic sanctions that are often ignored by Washington's foreign policy elite and largely unknown to the American public.

The assassination of Iranian scientist [Mohsen Fakhrizadeh](#) is the latest in a long-running pressure campaign against Iran by the US and its allies such as Israel. However, in the case of sanctions, it is ordinary Iranians who are paying the biggest price.

The onslaught of sanctions and covert actions on Iran during the Trump era has not elicited concessions from the Iranian government, but it has caused immense pain inside Iran. Today, Iran's population is being crushed by the twofold blows of US sanctions and [the Covid-19 crisis](#), all while under the yoke of an increasingly repressive government.

The Trump administration [imposed new sanctions](#) after it [pulled out](#) of the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018, crippling an economy that supports over 83 million lives. And despite the harrowing toll of the pandemic in Iran, the epicentre of the virus in the Middle East, Trump is bent on [increasing](#) sanctions all the way up to President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration on 20 January. The administration has ignored a wide range of [calls](#) from world leaders and the United Nations to provide sanctions relief amid the coronavirus outbreak.

Recently, 75 Democrats in Congress also sent a [letter](#) to the Trump administration to demand measures to ensure that all countries can get essential medical equipment during the pandemic despite ramped-up US sanctions.

A humanitarian crisis

In recent weeks, many Iranians have begun documenting the humanitarian crisis unleashed by sanctions using the hashtag, Ravayat-e Tahrim ([#روایت تحریم](#)) meaning "the story of sanctions". The personal accounts corroborate the dismal economic data coming out of Iran,

which show striking declines in the consumption of even staple goods such as red meat and rice.

The suffering and helplessness of the Iranian people today underscores the callous nature of President Trump's approach to Iran, and the moral and strategic need for relieving pressure on the Iranian people and rethinking America's sanctions policy under the incoming Biden administration.

Many of the stories Iranians have shared online relate to a loss of access to life-saving medicines. While humanitarian goods such as food and medicine are technically exempt from the US sanctions regime, groups such as Human Rights Watch have [documented](#) how the blanket economic and financial sanctions have deterred foreign firms and banks from facilitating humanitarian trade with Iran, including for "vital medicines and medical equipment".

The outcome of this policy has harmed Iran's most vulnerable, especially patients suffering from chronic and rare diseases such as multiple sclerosis, haemophilia, HIV/AIDS, epilepsy, and cancers. For many Iranians, their lives now depend on scrounging for increasingly scarce medicine.

One Iranian Twitter user [wrote](#) how he searched for his father's diabetes medication at "seven or eight" pharmacies to no avail. Then, at a pharmacy in Tehran's Ferdowsi square, he saw a woman who was searching for but could not find the blood thinner medication Plavix. "I forgot my own troubles and stared at her as she left the pharmacy hopeless," he wrote. "I felt ashamed that we had Plavix at home for my father who suffered a stroke."

Rapid decline

The firsthand reports of the desperation wreaked by US sanctions are made even bleaker by the overall economic picture in the country. [According](#) to the Statistical Centre of Iran, from March 2016 to March this year, GDP per capita decreased by roughly 10 percent. The price of basic foodstuffs such as butter and beans has more than doubled over this period, while housing and automobile prices have skyrocketed to an extent that they are unaffordable for all but the wealthiest citizens.

As the incomes of Iranian households have decreased, so too have domestic consumption patterns, even for vital foodstuffs. The statistics in this regard show how shockingly impoverished Iranians have become: from 2011 to 2020, red meat consumption has declined by 51.6 percent, rice by 34.7 percent, and dairy products by 35.3 percent. Notably, the previous round of sanctions imposed by the Obama administration was only beginning to lift in 2016 before [being reimposed](#) with greater severity by President Trump in 2018.

While perennial corruption and domestic mismanagement have long played a role in Iran's economic malaise, Iran experienced [13 percent growth in 2016](#), the year the nuclear deal went into effect, and was on the path to further growth.

The rapid economic decline of recent years is directly [attributable](#) to the Trump administration's so-called ["maximum pressure" campaign](#), which has slashed Iran's oil exports, cut the value of its currency by two-thirds, and resulted in rampant inflation. The Iranian people have been subject to great misery with no discernable dividends for US national security interests or regional stability.

US sanctions have also helped crush Iran's civil society, which has already been under immense pressure from the state. Over the last several years, Iranian civil society activists, like other Iranians, have grown poorer, sicker, and more hopeless.

"Being poorer means that many engaged in this sector as volunteers are no longer able to continue their activism, as they have to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. As such, Iranian civil society is losing its most valuable asset: its volunteer activists," said Sussan Tahmasebi, a prominent women's rights activist and civil society leader.

However, the sad reality is that Iran's civil society that once advocated rights is now shifting gears to meet basic demands such as for food and medical care. "It will take years for Iranian civil society to recover from these setbacks, just as it will take years for Iranians to recover from the economic setbacks of the last few years," Tahmasebi added.

Restoring Iranians' trust

The Trump administration's sanctions on Iran become an end unto themselves. They have triggered a humanitarian disaster while failing to meet any reasonably defined US objectives towards Iran.

After years of maximum pressure, the Iranian government's foreign policy is unchanged, its nuclear programme is [more advanced](#), and its most hardline factions are greatly empowered. The current US policy has only managed to brutally immiserate a population already under the yoke of a repressive government.

Hossein Nooraninejad, the spokesperson of Iran's largest reformist party, the United People's Party, told us that sanctions have not resulted in their stated goals because the Iranian people have endured them, some as an act of "resistance" to the US and others due to coercion. Nooraninejad adds that Iranians are also increasingly demanding a diplomatic resolution to tensions with the US, because of the impact of sanctions on their lives.

The Biden administration must rethink the use of broad sanctions as a foreign policy tool. As the Iran case currently shows, the net outcome of such sanctions is only widespread suffering and geopolitical instability.

To restore US trust with the Iranian people and its credibility as a defender of human rights globally, President Biden must provide relief from collectively punishing sanctions as a first step to finding diplomatic solutions to disputes with Iran.

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