

A Dedicated Obsession: Washington's Continuing Iran Sanctions Regime

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One dogma that is likely to persist in US foreign policy during a Biden presidency will be the sanctions regime adopted towards Iran. Every messianic state craves clearly scripted enemies, and the demonology about the Islamic Republic is not going to go begging. Elliot Abrams, the current US special representative for Iran, [told](#) Associated Press on November 12 that,

“Even if you went back to the (nuclear deal) and even if the Iranians were willing to return ... this newly enriched uranium, you would not have solved these fundamental questions of whether Iran is going to be permitted to violate long-term commitments it has made to the world community.”

It is worth pointing out that it was President Donald Trump who proved so itchy to renege on the nuclear deal to begin with. In May 2018, his administration formally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the long negotiated harvest of the Obama administration in July 2015. Over the course of 120 days, [it re-imposed](#) all previously lifted economic sanctions, including “secondary sanctions” on non-US entities conducting financial or commercial transactions with Iran. A unilateral shredding of Washington's own undertakings was made while still expecting the mullahs to continue in sweet compliance.

The less than compliant [response](#) from Tehran has not made this one of Trump's finer moments: an abandonment of nuclear limits marked out by the agreement; a resumption of the nuclear program; an increasingly emboldened stance in the Middle East. According to UN inspectors, Iran's enriched stockpile currently lies at 2,440 kilograms. Under the deal, it would have been under 300 kilograms. All of this took place despite the precipitous fall in oil exports, a decline in currency value and a steep rise in inflation.

Even before the pandemic, human rights organisations were already warning about the broader health implications of a brutal sanctions regime. As Human Rights Watch [explained](#) in an October 2019 report, the consequences of such sanctions “pose a serious threat to Iranians' right to health and access to essential medicines – and has almost certainly contributed to documented shortages – ranging from a lack of critical drugs for epilepsy patients to limited chemotherapy medications for Iranians with cancer.”

The US State Department and the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control [continue to maintain](#) that humanitarian goods, which also covers medicine and medical supplies, are exempt in the sanctions policy. A rosily inaccurate picture, given the imposition of sanctions on 18 Iranian banks including those entities engaged in financing foods and medicines. To this comes the added complication of what the US considers [“dual use”](#) items: hazmat suits,

face shields, oxygen generators, air filters. Decisions to grant exemptions, the purview of bureaucrats, are tardily made.

The advent of the novel coronavirus pandemic inspired a ghoulish train of thought in the Trump administration. Easing sanctions to better enable Iran to cope with COVID-19 was never entertained. Instead, as Djavad Salehi-Isfahani of the Brookings Institute [observed](#), “the US piled on more sanctions, and chose to ignore calls from world leaders, former US diplomats, and the United Nations to ease sanctions.” Such a bloodthirsty sentiment [was captured](#) by the *Wall Street Journal* in March 2020, whose editors decided that sanctions should continue, despite Iran becoming a pandemic hotspot. “If American sanctions were the culprit, it might be reasonable to consider lifting them. But the regime’s incompetence and self-interest are to blame.”

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif thought differently of it, [accusing](#) the US of “medical terrorism” in blunting Tehran’s efforts to access financial resources during the COVID-19 crisis. Hadi Yazdani, a physician and a member of the reformist Union of Islamic People Party, sports a [more nuanced view](#): US sanctions have well hobbled the government’s pandemic policy, but so has inefficiency and habitual bureaucratic mismanagement.

The dedicatedly nasty sanctions regime encouraged and enforced by the United States is now [frustrating efforts](#) in the country to make advance payment to the COVAX facility, created to assist in providing future COVID-19 vaccines to more indigent states. This will become more pressing, given rising death tolls. (On November 13, 461 were reported in the state media.)

The rate of COVID-19 infections is also scorching: 11,737 cases over 24 hours from Friday, [according](#) to Sima Sadat Lari, a health ministry spokeswoman who has become the regular herald of doom. She also [admitted](#) that various questions on the vaccines remained unanswered, notably in terms of “how effective the vaccine is and for what groups it is more effective.”

During the transition period in US politics, we can expect the Trump administration to be particularly testy about modifying its position on sanctions. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo continues to busy himself with blacklisting Iranian entities. The Treasury Department, for instance, recently placed a supply chain network on the list, [claiming it](#) “facilitated the procurement of sensitive goods, including US-origin electronic components” for an Iranian entity linked to the production of “military communication systems, avionics, information technology, electronic warfare, and missile launchers.”

Pompeo – and in this, he has a few devotees- argues that a return to the nuclear deal would be dotty and dangerous. “It’s a crazy idea to think that you’re going to get back into a deal that permitted a clean pathway for the Iranians to have a nuclear weapon by which they could terrorize the entire world.” President-elect Joe Biden, for his part, [insists that Iran](#) “must return to strict compliance with the deal. If it does so, I would rejoin the agreement and use our renewed commitment to diplomacy to work with our allies to strengthen and extend it, while more effectively pushing back against Iran’s other destabilizing activities.”

The statements of the president-elect suggest nothing comforting to health specialists and policy makers bearing witness to the suffering caused by sanctions. Trump’s “maximum pressure” policy might be abandoned in name, but will continue exerting a haunting

influence. The hawks in the Republican Party will be sharpening their talons, ever watchful of any softening towards Tehran.

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