

Collateral Damages of Smart Sanctions on Iran

Written by Ali Fathollah-Nejad

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ALI FATHOLLAH-NEJAD, APR 19 2010

This time's war-mongers' season found its *apogée* in U.S. neo-con Daniel Pipes' "bomb Iran" advice to Obama, shortly after Tony Blair's "We face the same problem about Iran today" orgy at the Chilcot Inquiry on Iraq was accompanied by a considerable military build-up in the Persian Gulf region. All this occurred amidst the continued struggle of Iran's civil rights movement and proclamations of Western leaders to be in support of the latter's efforts. But is there any evidence for this?

In contradistinction to war, sanctions are widely portrayed as necessary, almost healthy medicine to bring about change in the opponent's policies. However, as the history of the West-Iran conflict proves, sanctions have rather the state of crisis alive than contributed to its resolution. Nonetheless, Western governments do not seem to have lost their dubious fascination for them.

As the call for "crippling sanctions" became morally questionable when last summer the impressive Green wave shook the streets of Tehran for fear of wrecking the same, today the benign sounding "smart" or "targeted" sanctions are on the tip of everyone's tongue. Yet, a close look reveals a great deal of wishful thinking as to the effects of such sanctions.

Gigantic dimensions of "smart sanctions"

"Smart sanctions", it is claimed, are a magic wand with which to decapitate evil. In the Iranian case, evil is being identified with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. Originally a defense organization erected to counter Iraqi aggression in the 1980s, the Guardians have developed into an expansive socio-politico-economic conglomerate which is believed to possess unrivalled economic and political power in today's Islamic Republic.

As we are told, "smart sanctions" shall target the Guardians' grip on the Iranian power structure. The much neglected difficulty here is while it is widely acknowledged that the bulk of Iranian economy is now in the hands of the Guardians, in the end millions of civilians connected to these wide-ranging sectors will be affected. In this view, the gigantic dimension of these alleged "smart sanctions" comes to the fore.

So-called "crippling sanctions" that target petrol supply to Iran are en route. In anticipation of those U.S. unilateral sanctions, the world's largest insurance companies have announced their retreat from Iran. This concerns both the financial and shipping sectors, and affects petrol supplies to Iran which imports 40 percent of its needs. Also three giant oil traders ended supplies to Iran, which amounted to half of Tehran's imports. Needless to say, such sanctions ultimately harm the population. To add, a complete implementation thereof – i.e. preventing Asian competitors to step in – would require a naval blockade which amounts to an act of war.

Crippling the ordinary population

As stressed by civil society figures and economists, the price of sanctions is being paid by the Iranian population at large. The Iranian economy – manufacturing, agriculture, bank and financial sectors etc. – has been hurt from almost three decades of sanctions. Even today, businesses cannot easily obtain much needed goods on the international market to continue production and must often pay above-standard prices. Moreover, the scientific community has

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faced discrimination in areas of research as has Iran's technological advances been slowed down. Also, reflecting the dangers sanctions pose to the Green Movement, last fall Mir-Hossein Mousavi stated: "We are opposed to any types of sanctions against our nation." The same was recently uttered by his fellow opposition leader Mehdi Karroubi in an interview with *Corriere della Serra*.

Meanwhile a more fundamental problem remains – hardly acknowledged by many proponents who succumb to the adventurous illusion of having a say in the design and implementation of sanctions: They are mainly designed by the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), introduced to the U.S. Congress and finally implemented by the Treasury Department's Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Stuart Levey – an AIPAC confidant. Along this process, the potential suffering by Iran's civil society is hardly playing a role.

Sanctions – either "crippling" or "smart" – ultimately harm ordinary citizens. "Smart sanctions" are as an oxymoron as "smart weapons" which supposedly by "surgical strikes" only take out evil components. Indeed, much like its militaristic brother-in-spirit, at the end the "collateral damages" of "smart sanctions" remain dominant.

A futile political instrument in today's world

More generally, in an increasingly multipolar globalized world and imposed upon energy-rich countries, sanctions as an effective policy tool are basically futile. Too numerous are business-driven actors that are only too happy to jump in. Thus, Chinese, Russian, and even U.S. companies (acting via Dubai) have hugely benefitted from the European, U.S.-pressured withdrawal from the Iranian market.

Thus, sanctions – a medicine with which Western policy-circles are so obsessed with – is not a cure but a slow poison applied to the civil society and thus the civil rights movement. Sanctions as prototype of economic warfare in concert with the seasonal flaring-up of war-mongering are a dangerous mix. The deafening "drums of war" continue to bang upon the beating heart of Iran's civil society.

Sanctions and threats of war: A poisonous for democratic development

All this suggests that sanctions are perhaps a fig leaf for other agendas. For, in contrast to Western proclamations, sanctions do harm the civil society while cementing the position of hardliners. Iran's middle class as a result will be affected by this further isolation of the country as sanctions punish honest traders and reward corrupt ones. The Guardians with their assumed 60 harbors at the Persian Gulf control the bulk of imports and sanctions will only bolster the trend of flourishing "black channels".

One might indeed argue that the not-so-unconscious "collateral damage" of never-ending sanctions is a *de facto* undermining of any meaningful transition to more democracy in Iran – a prospect which would set an uncomfortable precedent for the West's authoritarian friends in the region.

What next: "Surgical strikes" or serious diplomacy?

At the very least, the unending story of sanctions bears testimony to Western leaders' commitment to uphold "credibility" in the face of adverse conditions as to coercing their will on Iran. A futile exercise – even a dangerous one – if one begins to contemplate about the aftermath of "smart sanctions" being imposed: Will the next desperate move entail "surgical strikes"?

Instead of go on believing that sanctions will one day develop their desired effects, it is high time to put the brakes. Hence, the only way forward would be to adopt a set of policies that would disarm hardliners of *all* sides whose business flourishes in the vicious cycle of enmity. It is only by détente that grist to the mills of radicalism can be halted – and a sustainable de-militarization of Iranian politics attained. Revoking existing sanctions on goods for civilian use could work wonders that would shake the very fundamentals of confrontational postures.

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Despite all frivolous claims, the diplomatic route has not been exhausted. Indeed, we are far from it. Since the core problem remains the “security dilemma” in the region, it would be wise for the West to call upon Israel to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The transatlantic “coercive strategy” vis-à-vis Iran – as it is accurately described in Diplomatic Studies – must be suspended for it undermines prospects for peace and development towards democracy.

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