

Sanctions and Postcolonial Statecraft in Iran: Resisting the Iran Libya Sanctions Act and Beyond

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Abstract

Though economic sanctions are designed to weaken and isolate their target for the stated purpose of policy change, in the case of Iran they have often invigorated its desire to defy Western coercion and domination. Since the Islamic revolution this has led to multiple political standoffs, including notably during the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad administration and the post-nuclear deal standoff with the United States (US). Through sanctions, the West has often been unwilling to accept little less than a grand bargain on Iranian foreign policy, which has informed and contributed to a postcolonial narrative of resistance in the Iranian state. This narrative has served as an integral tool of Iranian statecraft in an effort to bolster the leadership's legitimacy. By looking at elite discourse and Iranian government responses to the Iran Libya Sanctions Act during Ahmadinejad's government and the Trump Administration's Maximum Pressure campaign, this article highlights narratives of postcolonial resistance in Iran's response to US sanctions, in an effort to explain why sanctions often push them further away from acquiescence to international norms.

Keywords: Sanctions, Postcolonialism, Resistance, Iran

1. Introduction

The efficacy of sanctions in altering the policies of target-states is a significant point of contention in International Relations (IR) scholarship. Though they have been used in a variety of contexts for some time, the controversy arises from a largely unproven track record in their mandate.¹ They may have been able to effectively isolate target states, but sanctions are often ineffective at changing their policies in the years following the Cold War.² Yet they are one of very few options at the disposal of states in the Global North in response to states that contravene international norms. As such, they remain a staple at the disposal of states that wish to either express their disapproval for another state's actions or attempt to coerce them into changing their behaviour.

From a postcolonial perspective however, sanctions are far from a legitimate form of coercion. Their purpose is to shape the Global South from without and mould it to comply with the needs of the Global North. The sanctioned state can therefore see themselves as an

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¹ Susan Hannah Allen, "The Determinants of Economic Sanctions Success and Failure," *International Interactions* 31, no. 2 (2005): 117.

² Tim Niblock, *Pariah States and Sanctions in the Middle East: Iraq, Libya, and Sudan* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2001), 217-220.

object of domination at the hands of power structures that have long subjugated subaltern peoples. But adjacent to legitimate moral and political critiques of sanctions, sanctioned governments are often able to cultivate significant political legitimacy from being a target of sanctions by drawing specifically on postcolonial narratives. This often counteracts the intended effects of economic coercion, especially in states that incorporate this narrative into their economic and security policy.

Iran has been the target of both unilateral and multilateral sanctions since the Islamic revolution, beginning with the US enacting punitive measures in relation to the hostage crisis. For the most part, sanctions have been employed in response to three Iranian policy paradigms; its nuclear enrichment program, its regional activity through proxy armies and human rights abuses. Despite the severe economic impact sanctions have had on the economy since the revolution, Iran has made few concessions regarding these policies since.³ Decades of sanctions prior to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) had succeeded in enacting heavy consequences on the government and its population but had not forced Iran to the negotiating table until 2012. In fact, it had further emboldened resistance to negotiation. During the second term of President Ahmadinejad, Iran outwardly celebrated their own ability to weather Western efforts to change its policy. Ahmadinejad told NBC in September 2010 that:

Even if the U.S. administration increases the sanctions and — 100 times more, and even the Europeans join the United States to impose heavier sanctions, we in Iran are in a position to meet our own requirements.⁴

It is important to note that these words were spoken a year before the Ayatollah approved bilateral talks with US to relieve intense economic pressure. But Iran was able to foil Western attempts at economic coercion for decades prior. It is resistance to sanctions had been largely successful due to fostering a discourse of resistance that has been embraced by the leadership as part of its ideological narrative.⁵

This article explores sanctions regimes employed against Iran; focusing primarily on the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) during the Ahmadinejad administration and the Maximum Pressure campaign following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. It pays particular attention to the elite institutionalisation of postcolonial discourses that informed ‘resistance policies,’ which significantly hindered the effectiveness of these frameworks. The main takeaway from this piece is that policy coercion will remain ineffective if isolation through sanctions continues to be the only goal of US policy toward Iran, thanks to the way the Islamic Republic have incorporated a postcolonial approach into their policy formulation. Framing sanctions through a postcolonial lens adds strength to the government’s narrative that the West are only willing to negotiate on their own terms, providing proof of the US as a bad-faith actor. Sanctions have enacted an enormous economic toll on Iran, and conventional theoretical wisdom says that the material relative gains do not seem to exist for the regime to continue resisting them. But this says more about how *realpolitik* perspectives tend to sideline some perspectives and historical context in favour of assumptions about national interest. Efforts to curtail Iran’s regional policies are seen by the Islamic Republic as a continuation of a desire

³ Ray Takeyh and Susan Maloney, “The Self-Limiting Success of Iran Sanctions,” *International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2011): 1297.

⁴ “Ahmadinejad: Muslims ‘are not against Americans, Jews, Christians,’” *NBC News*, September 16, 2010, accessed date April, 2024. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna39202371>

⁵ Takeyh and Maloney, “The Self-Limiting Success of Iran Sanctions,” 1306.

of the West to control Iran in the same manner they had done in the colonial past, making it in the national interest to resist economic coercion wherever possible - even at significant cost.⁶

Iran often incorporates economic resistance to sanctions into its domestic and foreign policy. Postcolonialism forms the ideological core of this effort, providing a policy rationale and rhetorical lexicon domestically. However, this arguably took on a new dimension in the post-JCPOA period and following the introduction of the Trump administration's Maximum Pressure campaign. This is because the goals of US sanctions drifted even further away from policy change, favouring political isolation and regime change. Effectively removing the option for Iran to make policy concessions in exchange for sanctions relief has not only made resistance to their effects existential for the Islamic Republic, it also further cements the postcolonial narrative as an effective justification.

However, theoretically this piece does not see postcolonial narratives deployed by the state as an emancipatory project. Postcolonialism as a critical theory highlights the violence of oppressive structures through the legacy of colonialism. While Iran was not a formal colony of European powers, it undoubtedly has a colonial experience through resource, human and political exploitation at their hands. But as Emmanuel Bueya points out, while the colonial state opposed the colonial people, "the postcolonial system [often becomes] an instrument of oppression fused by the political elite."⁷ In this case the postcolonial resistance of sanctions, though rooted in real historical exploitation at the hands of colonial powers, is primarily a tool of statecraft and upholding the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. Routinely, government resistance to sanctions has led to further oppression of the Iranian people both economically and politically and should not be confused with an emancipatory project.

As such, the article will focus primarily on elite discourses that frame resistance to sanctions in anti-imperialist terms. The article begins by situating the literature on sanctions as both a form of policy coercion and containment of revisionist states, then looks at the nature of US sanctions on Iran before and after the JCPOA. The incorporation of postcolonial resistance into Iran's national interest discourse and policy will then be explored, followed by discussion on why this means sanctions have been ineffective.

2. Coercion through Sanctions

Few scholars dispute that sanctions in general have a less-than desirable rate of success historically.⁸ Though the character of sanctions changes significantly from case to case,⁹ sanctions are often ineffective in many of their stated goals. The International Committee of the British House of Commons issued a report in 1999 stating that, "Although sanctions may well represent a low-cost alternative to war in financial terms, they are all too often as damaging – in humanitarian and developmental terms – as armed conflict."¹⁰ Tim Niblock, in his analysis of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions in the late twentieth century, found that sanctions indeed strengthened the governments of the target state and undermined democratisation, stability and regional cooperation efforts, all while failing to

⁶ Oliver Borszik, "International Sanctions against Iran under President Ahmadinejad: Explaining Regime Persistence," *German Institute for Global Area Studies*, no. 260 (2014): 10-14.

⁷ Emmanuel Bueya, *Stability in Postcolonial African States* (Maryland: Lexington, 2018), x.

⁸ Elena V. McLan and Taehee Whang, "Designing Foreign Policy: Voters, Special Interest Groups, and Economic Sanctions," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 5 (2014): 589.

⁹ Niblock, "The Regional and Domestic Political Consequences of Sanctions Imposed on Iraq Libya and Sudan," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2001): 59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

“achieve the immediate objectives sought by the Security Council.”¹¹ Shortly after the 9/11, Gary Clyde Hufbauer explained that targeted sanctions could effectively assist in curbing transnational terrorism and support coalition efforts in the “war on terror.”¹² Since then, the updated Threat and Imposition of Sanctions (TIES) data shows that in the period between 1945 and 2005, fifteen sanctions regimes were imposed of which only four were deemed to have positive outcomes.¹³ Hufbauer, et al. suggest that roughly one-third of global economic sanctions were successful in achieving their stated objectives, while successful sanctions involving the US have declined from the post-war period to about 25 percent.¹⁴ Hufbauer and Oegg attribute this decline partially to globalisation. The notion is that, while an increase in global economic interdependence potentially has made target economies more vulnerable, it has also “created more opportunities to evade sanctions as alternative markets and suppliers become available.”¹⁵

Where behaviours cannot be changed, sanctions are often used punitively and can have a cyclical or ‘indefinite’ character. This is particularly common in target states where the costs of compliance are seen to be higher than non-compliance. Isolation and punishment are therefore often an unstated goal. Though almost all sanctions regimes have objectives and criteria for the target state to meet, they are often difficult to define or benchmark.¹⁶ For example, Belarus has been under evolving but mostly consistent European Union (EU) sanctions for more than two decades. When sanctions had been temporarily relaxed, they were not in response to any changes in the policies of the target. In this case, suspension of measures and negotiation with the target has been “due to political considerations rather than because their conditions were being met.”¹⁷

Postcolonial scholarship argues that punishment for the purpose of subordination is often the primary goal of sanctions. In contexts like Mugabe-era Zimbabwe, Munoda Mararike posits that where states refuse to comply, institutional, financial, and humanitarian damage is an intentional side-effect.¹⁸ The response in the case of Western sanctions on Zimbabwean land reform in 2001 was *Chimurenga*: a ‘war’ against colonial domination, waged by both the state and ordinary ‘native’ Zimbabweans.¹⁹ In defiance of Western sanctions and to massive economic detriment, the state pursued a land distribution that reversed the colonial provisions laid out in the Lancaster House Agreement. While Mugabe’s government also subjugated its citizens, it effectively created a ‘rally around the flag’ effect through colonial resistance. This is illustrated in the post-Mugabe governments embrace of continued land reform and upholding the values of *Chimurenga*.²⁰

In this view, economic sanctions are not just ineffective at policy change – they are often not designed to be. We should therefore not be surprised when target states rally around

¹¹ Ibid., 63.

¹² Navin A. Bapat, et al., “Economic Sanctions, Transnational Terrorism and the Incentive to Misrepresentation,” *The Journal of Politics* 78, no. 1 (2016): 249.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Gary Clyde Hufbauer, et al., *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered, 3rd Edition* (London: Pearson 2007), 98.

¹⁵ Gary Clyde Hufbauer and Barbara Oegg, “Economic Sanctions: Goal and Private Compensation,” *Chicago Journal of International Law* 4, no. 2 (2003): 309.

¹⁶ Yulija Miadzvetskaya and Celia Challet, “Are the EU Restrictive Measures Really Targeted, Temporary and Preventive? The Case of Belarus,” *Europe & the World* 6, no. 1 (2022): 1-20.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Munoda Mararike, “Zimbabwe Economic Sanctions and Post-Colonial Hangover: A Critique of Zimbabwe Democracy Economic Recovery Act (ZDERA),” *International Journal of Social Sciences* 7, no.1 (2019): 30.

¹⁹ Ibid., 29.

²⁰ Ibid., 31.

resisting them. Sanctions often speak to an international dissonance of order and justice, situating states in a hierarchy, “thus pitting a globally subaltern vision, broadly defined, against a globally hegemonic or dominant one.”²¹ While not an endorsement of their policies, this is a potential explanation as to why non-Western societies vehemently oppose Western sanctions regimes and are willing to weather significant consequences to resist them.

The current method and application of sanctions is essentially viewed as imperialist by postcolonial analysis. The sanctioning party “defines its identity through the act of dissociating itself from the target it considers to be ‘the troublesome or the evil other.’ The ‘virtuous self’ is defined through this process of dissociation.”²² Sanctions are a tool of both differentiation and subordinating primarily. Therefore, the instrumental justification of sanctions is flawed for states in that the probability of failure or eliciting unwanted outcomes is high.²³ However, though multilateral and unilateral sanctions aim to delineate what is just in the international community, there are also problems with judging their success in this context. The justification of sanctions often equates the citizenry of a target state with the government. Adeno Addis points to the example of Iraq, in which former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright suggested that the alleged half-million deaths related to sanctions was an acceptable price for policy change.²⁴ The result is the devaluing of non-Western lives and an insensitivity to non-Western points of significance. Secondly, emphasising ‘objective’ notions of morality based on Western values in international politics gives governments cause and credibility to resist them. The target citizenry and authority alike begin to view sanctions as not a tool for justice, but instead yet another method of subjugation, in which values are imposed from the top to the detriment of those at the bottom.²⁵

Indeed, the postcolonial perspective is convincing on the purpose, utility, and effect of sanctions. For the US in particular, Iran appears to be an object of other political considerations rather than a peer with which they could come to an agreement with. We can see some of the Obama-era sanctions policies and the JCPOA negotiations as an exception to this otherwise consistent rule. Sanctions on Iran were an opportunity to solidify US hegemony post-Cold War, informing the rogue/pariah state narrative that allowed the international community to rally around US foreign policy interests. This is exemplified by the multiple occasions in which the Islamic Republic presented an olive branch to the US, each of which was rebuffed in favour of isolating it politically. The legacy of much of Western sanctions on Iran is punishment and subordination – not to change policy or to enable re-engagement, which has often served the consolidation of the Islamic Republic’s political power. Where it can, this has been exploited by the Islamic Republic and used to strengthen their economic and political legitimacy.

3. Sanctions on Iran

It is worth pointing out that there is a wealth of scholarship and commentary on the details of US sanctions on Iran prior to the JCPOA. The summary of the ILSA will therefore be brief, but it is also worth exploring multilateral and EU sanctions on Iran. as well. US sanctions

²¹ Mohammed Ayoob, “Making Sense of Global Tensions: Dominant and Subaltern Concepts of Order and Justice in the International System,” *International Studies* 47, no. 2-4 (2010): 129.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 583.

²⁴ Adeno Addis, “Economic Sanctions and the Problem of Evil,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2003): 608.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 601.

coupled with UNSC and EU sanctions were foundational in Iran's postcolonial justification for resistance.

3.1. Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA/ISA)

Since the Iranian hostage crisis, Iran has been the target of a broad array of sanctions from the US. The most notable began with the US-imposed Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) in 1995, which sought to “deny Iran the resources to further its nuclear program and to support terrorist organisations such as Hezbollah, Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad.”²⁶ Leading up to the ILSA, President Bill Clinton's administration was particularly keen to use Iran as an example of how it planned to lead a world-wide non-proliferation movement.²⁷ This meant that, short of Iran abandoning all nuclear proliferation, there was little room for negotiation on these economic measures.

The ILSA marked a departure in strategy from previous sanctions regimes undertaken by the US. Typically, US sanctions had focussed on only restricting American companies from trading and conducting business with targeted nations and individuals.²⁸ The ILSA broadened presidential powers by allowing the executive branch to penalize foreign companies that invested in the Iranian or Libyan petroleum and gas industries.²⁹

Sanctions under the ILSA continually evolved over the next two decades to encompass more individuals and institutions, while increasing pressure on Iran's energy sector. In 2006, UN Security Council resolution 1737 unanimously adopted targeted multilateral economic pressures on Iran in relation to its nuclear activity, stating that Iran should suspend “all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including research and development; and work on all heavy-water related projects, including the construction of a research reactor moderated by heavy water.”³⁰ Having previously done little more than uphold the sanctions regimes outlined in resolution 1737, the EU followed the US in 2010 and imposed its own autonomous sanctions.

In 2006, with Iran's nuclear program becoming of increased concern to the US government, congress deemed that the sanctions program needed to continue its pressure on the Iranian economy while promoting a democratic change of government. The amendments became law in the form of Iran Freedom Support Act Amendments³¹ which altered the ILSA by:

- “Impos[ing] (two or more) mandatory sanctions on a person or entity that knowingly helps Iran acquire or develop chemical, nuclear or biological weapons of mass destruction or destabilising types and numbers of conventional weapons...;
- “Add[ing] a requirement that Iran be determined to pose no significant threat to U.S. national security, interests, or allies in order to lift sanctions against entities investing in Iran's petroleum industry;

²⁶ Kenneth Katzman, “Iran Sanctions,” *Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East* 2, no. 2 (2011): 211.

²⁷ Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei, *Iran, Israel, and the United States: The Politics of Counter-proliferation Intelligence* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

²⁸ Meghan McCurdy, “Unilateral Sanctions with a Twist: The Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996,” *American University International Law Review* 13, no. 2 (1998): 398.

²⁹ “Security Council Imposes Sanctions on Iran for Failure to Halt Uranium Enrichment, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1737 – SC/8928,” *United Nations*, December 23, 2006, accessed date May 25, 2023. <http://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8928.doc.htm>

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ H.R. 6198 – Public Law: 109-293, Passed during 109th US Congress on 30 September, 2006.

- “Renam[ing] the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996 as the Iran Sanctions Act [ISA] of 1996;
- Declar[ing] that it should be U.S. policy to support: (1) efforts by the Iranian people to exercise self-determination over their country’s form of government; and (2) independent human rights and peaceful pro-democracy forces in Iran;
- Authoris[ing] the President to provide financial and political assistance to eligible foreign and domestic individuals and groups that support democracy in Iran...³²

The ISA had transformed from unilateral sanctions that sought to isolate Iran from the world’s energy economy into a public declaration that the US sought to undermine the government’s legitimacy domestically. Though the Iran Freedom Support Act Amendments specifically stipulated that the use of force for democratic ends is prohibited,³³ the way the US had recently dealt with other violators of human rights in the region did not fill the clerical elite with confidence that they were completely safe from military confrontation. Furthermore, the conservatives along with Khamenei were concerned that any concessions made in relation to nuclear proliferation would result in more demands in the domain of human rights,³⁴ given what the US had put forward in their changes to the ISA.

The US sanctions beginning in 2009 are lauded for bringing Iran to the negotiating table, and there is certainly truth to this. But there are a number of factors that make this strategy different to the early ILSA/ISA sanctions. Through the Obama administration’s Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act (CISADA) the US couched its concerns of Iranian nuclear enrichment in international law, drawing significant support from the international community.³⁵ CISADA sought to isolate the financial sector and included targeted measures against members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), as it was believed to have significant influence over the financial sector.³⁶ The short-term goals of this suite were two-fold; improve the communication freedoms for Iranians and to restrict the capital and assets of regime government officials involved in undermining human rights. This had an immediate and unprecedented effect on banks in the Persian Gulf, who abandoned Iran’s oil industry wholesale.

The main difference between these sanctions and previous measures is how hard they hit working class Iranians. The decline of the manufacturing sector led to plant closures, delayed salary payments and 40% of male Iranians losing their jobs by September 2012.³⁷ The minimum wage dropped from 10,000,000 rials per month to 3,900,000, which was well below the poverty line. Though at the same time, Porsche was able to deliver more luxury cars to Tehran than any other major city in the Middle East.³⁸ The middle class had been destroyed. These sanctions certainly created the conditions for Iran to be amenable to negotiate, but the subsequent negotiations (and the way they were conducted) were far more important. In fact, had the JCPOA negotiations not occurred Iran could have plummeted into an economic and human catastrophe.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Borszik, “International Sanctions against Iran under President Ahmadinejad,” 10.

³⁵ Pardis Gheibi, “The Rise and Fall of US Secondary Sanctions: the Iran Outcasting and Re-Outcasting Regime,” *Georgia Journal of International and Comparative Law* 50, no. 2 (2022): 401.

³⁶ Ibid., 402.

³⁷ “Manufacturing, Blue-Collar Workers, and the Urban Poor,” *Centre for Human Rights in Iran*, April 29, 2013, accessed date April, 2023. <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/04/manufacturing-blue-collar-workers-and-the-urban-poor>

³⁸ Ibid.

3.2. UNSC and EU sanctions

Concurrent to US sanctions, UN multilateral sanctions began with those outlined in Security Council (UNSC) resolution 1737 in 2006. This package deviated from its US counterpart in rhetoric and scope, though the elements of forcing Iran to the negotiating table through economic and political isolation was the same. The sanctions were ratified after Iran failed to comply with resolution 1696, which stipulated that Iran must “without further delay take the steps required... [that are] essential to build confidence in the exclusively peaceful purpose of the nuclear programme...”³⁹ 1737 was brokered under the condition of compromise with Russia and China and their concerns that previous iterations had been too broad and punitive, as they hoped sanctions regimes would be designed only to restrict Iran’s nuclear weapons proliferation. The Security council did vote to restrict the export or transfer of “items, materials, equipment, goods and technology”⁴⁰ to Iran, but did not outline any punitive measures for states which did not comply. Sanctions outlined in the resolution targeted a list of 22 Iranian individuals and entities “engaged in, directly associated with or providing support for Iran’s proliferation... activities or the development of nuclear weapons systems...”⁴¹ by freezing their assets and restricting their investment.

But it would take until 2010 for the harshest multilateral sanctions to be imposed by the UNSC. Resolution 1929, citing a failure of Iran to “meet the requirements of the IAEA Board of Governors and comply with [previous] resolutions,”⁴² imposed restrictions on the trade of conventional weapons and sweeping sanctions on Iran’s financial sector. This effectively gave the green light for CISIDA and EU sanctions that aimed to cripple the Iranian economy. Resolution 1929 was a watershed moment in Iran’s resistance to sanctions because it became financially existential for the Islamic Republic. The Iranian effectively unable to conduct international transactions through the SWIFT transaction hub resulting in members of government facing significant factional political pressure over inefficiency and a floundering economy in 2011.⁴³ It is from this point that Iran pursues a concerted external diplomatic and economic effort to undermine the IAEA and UNSC’s enforcement capability.

Despite the struggle of the EU to agree on common foreign policy goals in other areas, Europe had largely been united behind its efforts to curb Iranian nuclear proliferation since 2003.⁴⁴ Europe had previously advocated dialogue-oriented mediation, abandoning this for direct involvement in line with the US. Notably though, despite wanting to improve transatlantic relations, the EU continually voiced its disapproval of the ILSA/ISA, citing the illegality of extraterritorial sanctions.⁴⁵ The EU also wanted to uphold the mandate of the non-proliferation treaty, and curbing Iran’s proliferation efforts would both address the problem of a nuclear Iran directly and strengthen the role of the IAEA.⁴⁶ However, the

³⁹ “Security Council Demands Iran Suspend Uranium Enrichment by 31 August, or Face Possible Economic, Diplomatic Sanctions – SC/8792,” *United Nations*, July 21, 2006, accessed date May 25, 2017. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8792.doc.htm>

⁴⁰ “Security Council Imposes Sanctions on Iran for Failure to Halt Uranium Enrichment, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1737 – SC/8928,” *United Nations*, December 23, 2006, accessed date May 25, 2017. <https://press.un.org/en/2006/sc8928.doc.htm>

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² “United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929,” *United Nations*, June 09, 2010, accessed date June 03, 2024. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n10/396/79/pdf/n1039679.pdf?token=9ITubi684krxsYHwk0&fe=true>

⁴³ Thomas Erdbrink, “Ahmadinejad admits impact of financial sanctions on Iran,” *The Washington Post*, November 5, 2011, accessed date June, 2024. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/ahmadinejad-admits-impact-of-sanctions-on-iran/2011/11/01/gIQAyBlacM_story.html

⁴⁴ Cornelius Adebahr, *Europe, and Iran: The Nuclear Deal and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2017) 42.

⁴⁵ Ruari Patterson, “EU Sanctions on Iran: The European Political Context,” *Middle East Policy Journal* 20, no. 1 (2013): 135.

⁴⁶ Adebahr, *Europe and Iran*, 42.

moderate elements within the government simply lacked the political influence to induce any desired changes in domestic policy.⁴⁷ When sanctions from the European bloc began in 2006, they were primarily minor supplementations to the Security Council sanctions, until 2010 when the EU “imposed three rounds of increasingly comprehensive autonomous economic sanctions that [went] well beyond UN requirements.”⁴⁸ The first round came into effect shortly after the passage of resolution 1929 and restricted European investment in Iranian oil and gas production as well as the export of refinery equipment.⁴⁹ The next round expanded restrictions on petrochemical products to encompass their import from Iran by EU states and froze Iranian Central Bank assets held in the EU.⁵⁰ Crucially, this round also banned the insurance of Iranian oil transportation. This had a significant impact on the global oil market, as 95 percent of oil-tankers world-wide were insured by one company which also fell under European law jurisdiction, making the secure transport of Iranian oil significantly more difficult.⁵¹ In 2012, similar insurance and import restrictions were placed on natural gas, though the EU had not previously imported any natural gas from Iran, making the measure largely symbolic.⁵² After this final round imposed during the Ahmadinejad administration, a total of Iranian 490 entities and 150 individuals were subject to EU asset freezes and travel bans.⁵³

3.3. “Maximum Pressure” sanctions

It is still not entirely clear what the policy rationale for the US withdrawal from the JCPOA was, other than it being an election promise of President Trump. Rhetorically however, the President presented the accord in 2018 as “the worst and most one-sided transaction the United States has ever entered into” failing “to protect America’s national security interests.”⁵⁴ These remarks were given following multiple reports of Iran’s compliance with the deal from both the IAEA and the Trump administration itself.⁵⁵ It was posited by the administration that while Iran was complying with its commitments to the JCPOA on paper, it was not complying with the “spirit” of the agreement, thanks to their continued ballistic missile testing and sponsorship of terrorism.⁵⁶ With this, the administration sent a signal to Iran and other signatories of the JCPOA that it was seeking a grand bargain on issues including and beyond nuclear proliferation.

From 8 May 2018, all ISA sanctions were reimposed, with a period in place for businesses to transition away from dealing with Iran. In the following years, additional sanctions were formulated and imposed creating what the administration called “the strongest sanctions in history.”⁵⁷ In total, the US imposed or re-imposed over 1,500 different sanctions on individuals

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Patterson, “EU Sanctions on Iran,” 135.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 136.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “President Donald J. Trump is Ending United States Participation in an Unacceptable Iran Deal,” *Trump White House Archives*, May 8, 2018, accessed date November 22, 2023. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/>

⁵⁵ Kristina Daugirdas and Julian Davis, “Trump Administration Recertifies Iranian Compliance with JCPOA Notwithstanding Increasing Concern with Iranian Behaviour,” *The American Journal of International Law* 111, No. 4 (October 2017): 1056.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 1058.

⁵⁷ Hamidreza Azizi, Vali Golmohammadi, and Amir Hossein Vazirian, “Trump’s ‘Maximum Pressure’ and Anti-containment in Iran’s Regional Policy,” *Digest of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 2 (2020) 151.

and businesses in 21 countries with a significantly expanded policy scope. Sanctions targeted the nuclear program, ballistic missile program, the funding of proxy militias, cyber warfare, and human rights abuses.⁵⁸ As before however, sanctions were primarily wielded against the energy sector, the IRGC and government officials. Before US sanctions were re-imposed, the Iranian economy experienced steady GDP growth between 2016 and 2018. By 2019, Iran's oil exports had fallen from 2.8 million bpd to less than 500 thousand bpd, causing its revenue from oil to plummet from \$100 billion to \$8 billion USD in less than 12 months.⁵⁹

In addition, sanctions after the US exit from the JCPOA have been less effective in other areas, most notably in their ability to restrict Iran's strategic reach in the region. The Quds Force remained as active as ever in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and beyond. Less than a year after sanctions were reimposed, attacks on US drones and on the Saudi Aramco oil facility in Jeddah originated in Tehran, while rocket attacks and roadside bombs from Quds-affiliated forces in Iraq stepped up against US troops.⁶⁰

Sanctions also appeared to have very little effect in strengthening pro-reform forces in Iran. As time went on anger towards the government increased dramatically, but the economic pressure on ordinary Iranians made it more difficult for this to translate into political action and activism. Poverty rates in Tehran households doubled from their lowest point in 2012, going from 15.4 percent to 26.6 percent in 2019, precipitated by sanctions.⁶¹ Spikes in gas prices initially caused public unrest and a brutal regime response that killed over 300. A pandemic, grief, economic frustration, and a growing cynicism of Iranian electoral politics led to record low voter turnout in both the 2020 parliamentary and 2021 presidential elections.⁶² The government's choice to effectively abandon voter choice in the electoral politics arguably contributed to a deep cynicism in voters, rather than embolden them to change their government.⁶³

While Maximum Pressure sanctions were clearly successful in dealing significant damage, they are yet to extract any deliverable policy changes from the Iranian government. Further, a clear desire to inflict economic damage on the Iranian government – and by extension its people – allowed Iran to return to its pre-JCPOA resistance of Western power. The difference this time is that there are very few options for a diplomatic off-ramp.

4. Building Resistance through Postcolonial Narratives

To say that US sanctions over four decades had no desired effects on Iran is not accurate. Much like Tim Niblock's study found in the post-Cold War era,⁶⁴ both unilateral and multilateral sanctions were somewhat effective at isolating Iran economically – though this is more complicated in the post-JCPOA period. It is also not suggested that sanctions did not play a role in getting the Iranian leadership toward the negotiating table with the P5+1. But as explained by Colin H Kahl, the Iranian leadership staked its legitimacy on its resistance to

⁵⁸ Andrew Hannah, "Sanctions 5: Trump's 'Maximum Pressure' Targets," *The Iran Primer*, March 3, 2021, accessed date November 22, 2023. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/mar/03/sanctions-5-trumps-maximum-pressure-targets>

⁵⁹ Azizi, Golmohammadi and Vaxirian, "Trump's 'maximum pressure' and anti-containment," 155.

⁶⁰ Daniel Drezner, "How Not to Sanction," *International Affairs* 98 no. 5 (2022): 1543.

⁶¹ Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, "The Impact of Sanctions on Household Welfare and Employment in Iran," *Middle East Development Journal* 15, no. 2 (2023): 215.

⁶² Amir Mahdavi, "Iran's 2021 Election as a Turning Point from Electoral Authoritarianism to Hegemonic Autocracy," *The Muslim World* 113, no. 1-2 (2023): 90.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶⁴ Niblock, *Pariah States and Sanctions*, 217-220.

Western power and influence, including sanctions regimes⁶⁵ and was therefore able to weather much of the costs. This narrative of resistance formed primarily during Ahmadinejad's government is a well that Iran has returned to and drawn heavily from after the JCPOA.

Prior to the JCPOA Iran only experienced three years of meaningful economic contraction between 2008 and 2017 – in 2012, 2013 and 2015.⁶⁶ Non-oil export diversification and building other forms of industrial resilience arguably led to “ultimately manageable...trade flow” in this period, despite contractions in the energy sector and government.⁶⁷ As a result, the JCPOA required years of hard-fought diplomacy on the part of US policy makers and an acknowledgement that top-down, punitive or ‘grand-bargain’ demands would not extract a desired policy outcome.

Maximum pressure on the other hand does the opposite. It removes any form of agreeable policy outcome by linking all of Iran's actions together – its nuclear program cannot be separated from its ballistic missile program, which cannot be separated from its funding of proxies, etc. As the policy rationale of resistance to colonial control was moderately effective prior to the JCPOA, it became even easier for the government to frame its policy of self-reliance and resistance as a core element of its national interests.

It is impossible to talk about Iranian resistance to sanctions without exploring the discourses and policies of the Ahmadinejad era. His presidency would build much of the resistance capacity that has served Iran after the JCPOA, and much of the postcolonial justification for resistance was institutionalised at this time. The bulk of analysis on the Ahmadinejad presidency early on does not take his ultra-nationalist rhetoric as serious foreign policy, instead it touted it as a manifestation of his lack of experience as a politician and expected the oligarchy to rein him in.⁶⁸ Masoud Kazemzadeh argues the opposite, saying that his comments “were not inadvertent words of an inexperienced official. Rather they were carefully chosen and accurately reflect the policies of his government, his inner circle, and his sub-faction.”⁶⁹ He and his cabinet reinvigorated the uncompromising anti-Western sentiment of the revolution within the political factions⁷⁰ and the Supreme Leader publicly and frequently endorsed Ahmadinejad's rhetoric. At the time Ahmadinejad and his faction, the principlists, represented a unique and powerful unifying force; one that loyally upheld the ideals of Khomeini and the revolution while being able to rally the population around anti-Western and anti-colonial rhetoric. Though the principalists' authority was eventually scuttled by the Supreme Leader himself, they were able to successfully navigate through a period in which Iran was one of the most sanctioned states worldwide without capitulation to external demands.⁷¹

Ahadinejad was essentially free to pursue a policy of zero capitulation without any elite dissent. Thus, the rhetorical and policy construction of a ‘resistance economy’ was invoked in response to sanctions. The idea of a political economy that is not just immune to Western coercion, but also pushes back at its enemies is something that had been close to Ayatollah

⁶⁵ Colin H. Kahl, “Not Time to Attack Iran: Why War Should Be a Last Resort,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 2 (March/April 2012): 166-173.

⁶⁶ Esfandyr Barmanghelidj, “The Ins and Outs of Iranian Resilience Under Sanctions,” *Muslim World* 111, no. 1 (2021): 97.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Masoud Kazemzadeh, “Ahmadinejad's Foreign Policy,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 2 (2007): 424.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Borszik, “International Sanctions Against Iran,” 10.

⁷¹ Borszik, “International Sanctions Against Iran,” 6.

Khamenei's heart since the early 1990s. For Khamenei, economic policies were not mere reactions to cost-benefit analyses like their neoliberal counterparts. An economy based purely on material gain was seen as un-Islamic and meant that the Iranian economy could be easily manipulated. Writings from clerics like Ayatollah Taleghani show how the resistance economy could easily be incorporated into state economic discourses.

Islamic Economics are founded on the principles of right and justice and are not based on any special group or class...The appearance of classes is the result of the defect of individuals in society [due to their] not following right and just principles. It is the by-product of transgression and colonialism.⁷²

Though they brought with them heavy economic pressures, the resistance economy provided potential political capital for hardliners. Iranian political leadership in the 1990's focussed on economic reform and distanced itself from revolutionary policies. Now that those who wished to return to the roots of the revolution were in power, sanctions presented an opportunity to deploy a narrative of revolutionary cohesion around resisting Western control. Both Khamenei and principalist leadership sought to remind both Iranians and Westerners that sanctions had never worked on the Islamic Republic, which had flourished in its self-sufficiency.⁷³ Khamenei often articulated these ideas publicly, as he did at the shrine of Imam Reza in March 2007:

Sanctions cannot deal a blow to us. Didn't they sanction us until today? We acquired nuclear energy under sanctions; we achieved scientific progress under sanctions; we achieved the country's broad reconstruction under sanctions. It is even possible that under certain conditions sanctions work to our advantage; from this perspective they can increase our ambition.⁷⁴

Contrary to the assessment of US State Department officials at the time, this statement from Khamenei was more than just empty rhetoric. Iran's long history of being the target of economic isolation had in fact given the leadership the tools to weather many of their effects. In some cases, Iran's manufacturing and technology industries have been emboldened by sanctions. A doctrine of 'self-reliance' was "well-accepted amongst state-level authorities and Iranian politicians continually assert that restrictions have helped propel industrial growth...turning sanctions into opportunities for progress."⁷⁵

This public rhetoric intensified gradually, but most significantly after the passage of UNSC Res. 1929. The decision of Russia and China not to veto the US-led sanctions scheme put Iran under significant international and domestic political pressure. From the end of 2010 cabinet members and officials issued a mixture of defiant threats and public statements lauding Iran's ability to skirt the intended effects of international sanctions. For example, the head of Iran's central bank threatened to "have an effect" on global fuel prices if sanctions were not lifted and raise the price to \$150 a barrel,⁷⁶ a foreign ministry spokesman bragged about Iran's domestic ballistic missile production capacity and Iran's foreign minister Ali

⁷² Ayatollah Taleghani in Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics, The Question of the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 175.

⁷³ Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics*, 1307.

⁷⁴ Ayatollah Khamenei, (2007) in Borszik, "International Sanctions Against Iran," 11.

⁷⁵ Mehdi Majidpour, "The Unintended Consequences of US-led Sanctions on Iranian Industries," *Iranian Studies* 46, no. 1 (2013): 12.

⁷⁶ Ben Birnbaum and Eli Lake, "Iran Central Banker: Lift Sanctions or Face Spike in Oil Prices," *Washington Post*, April 20, 2011, accessed date April, 2024. <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/apr/18/iranian-warns-retaliation-through-spike-price-oil/>

Akbar Salehi said that the US had repeated the mistake of sanctioning Iran for “32 years” without results.⁷⁷

But the increase in public rhetoric was also backed-up by policy changes. The primary effect of UNSC sanctions was an intensification of Iran’s export deflection policy. This had been quite effective in the past, and resulted in two-thirds of Iranian exports effected by sanctions to be deflected to non-sanctioning countries (NSCs) between 2008 and 2011.⁷⁸ By September 2010, Iranian money was making its way into Europe through Turkey, India paid of \$5 billion US in oil Purchase debt to Tehran and Pakistan agreed to accelerate the construction of the IP natural gas pipeline project.⁷⁹ At the same time, Iran’s nuclear enrichment technology was improving significantly, seeing an increase in centrifugal activity of 60%.⁸⁰

Thanks to US-led multilateral and unilateral sanctions, gas turbines used in refineries and power plants are now built entirely in Iran.⁸¹ In 2011, the Industry, Mine and Trade Ministry funded the construction of Iran’s first ‘gas to liquids’ (GTL) plant, which converts natural gas into petroleum or diesel fuel.⁸² GTL technologies are complex and difficult to develop, yet the plant was developed entirely indigenously.⁸³ Similarly, Iran pursued the indigenous production of petrochemical catalysts, after their German supply was cut off due to sanctions, reaching a stage of commercialised production of aMDEA (activated Methyl-diethanolamine).⁸⁴ For this reason, claims made by experts that advocate sanctions on Iran in political studies only look at half the story as the isolation has “stimulated a degree of enthusiasm and energy devoted to capability-building.”⁸⁵

Following then-President Barack Obama’s signing of CISIDA, President Ahamdinejad spoke to industrialists in July 2010 and characterised new US sanctions as “pathetic,” adding:

[the West] thought that having meetings and talking to each other and signing papers they could stop a great nations progress... Iran is much greater than what they can perceive it in their small minds. We know that if this Iranian civilisation [awakens] there would be no more room for arrogant, corrupt, and bullying powers.⁸⁶

Ahamdinejad’s talk of civilisation is similar to that of 20th century activist Jalal Al-e Ahmad in his book *Gharbzadagi*. Al-e Ahmad likened Western influence to an illness, or “an infestation of weevils,”⁸⁷ which has prevented Iran from preserving its own “historico-cultural character.”⁸⁸ Iran was in a period of sickness, unable to manifest its own civilizational destiny, instead moulded by other nations with “high wages [and] low morality.”⁸⁹ He notes

⁷⁷ Vaun Vira, “Sanctions on Iran: Reaction and Impact,” *Critical Threats*, 28 September 2010, accessed date June 1, 2024. https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/sanctions-on-iran-reactions-and-impact#_ednddec69bf699a706e9fb678f9409a065f25

⁷⁸ Jamal Ibrahim Haidar, “Sanctions and Export Deflection: Evidence from Iran,” *Economic Policy* 32, no.90 (2017): 326.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ivanka Barzashka, “Using Enrichment Capacity to Estimate Iran’s Breakout Potential,” *Federation of American Scientists Policy Brief*, January 21, 2011, accessed date June 1, 2024. https://pubs.fas.org/_docs/IssueBrief_Jan2011_Iran.pdf

⁸¹ Majidpour, “Consequences of US-led Sanctions,” 14.

⁸² Ibid., 13.

⁸³ Ibid., 14.

⁸⁴ aMDEA is “a catalyst for the removal of acid gases such as hydrogen sulphide and carbon dioxide... a high tech and expensive product in the petrochemical industry.” See, Ibid., 13.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁸⁶ Ramin Mostafavi, “Ahamdinejad Calls Sanctions Against Iran Pathetic,” *Reuters*, July 3, 2010, accessed date July 31, 2017. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-sanctions-ahmadinejad-idUSTRE66211K20100703>

⁸⁷ Jalal Al-e Ahmad, “Diagnosing an Illness,” in *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*, ed. Prasenjit Duara, (London: Routledge, 2004), 57.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁸⁹ Duara, *Decolonization*, 57.

that completely shaking off the Western “machine” is utopian, but accepts that “so long as [Iranians] remain consumers, so long as we have not built the machine, we remain poisoned by Occidentalism.”⁹⁰ An important voice for many Iranian conservatives including the Supreme Leader, Al-e Ahmad undoubtedly influenced Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric and policy on sanctions and relations with the West. Al-e’s writings explore “the conditions of Eurocentric and racialized forms of knowledge production...” and has been institutionalised in modern Iran’s political discourse.⁹¹

In 2013, President Ahmadinejad claimed that “the enemies of the Iranian nation try to block the nation’s progress... [by] wage[ing] a massive psychological war.”⁹² Through statements like these, the government constructed a narrative around its nuclear program that sought to both discredit the effects of Western sanctions and rally the population around self-reliance. Opinion polls, for what they were worth, seemed to support the intensification of Iran’s nuclear enrichment program - which the principalists interpreted as the public endorsement of the government’s “sanctions-tailored approach.”⁹³ They declared that sanctions and their negative effects were necessary in the pursuit of “anti-hegemonic foreign policy,”⁹⁴ constructing Iran’s foreign policy around the “awakening” of a defiant civilisation against an oppressor.

There is also substantial use of Islam as a postcolonial metaphor at the elite level. Primarily this is used to lexically link Islamic piety and postcolonial resistance. Ahmadinejad often coupled postcolonial rhetoric with “Twelver” Shiism. Like the Supreme leader, Ahmadinejad and those in his inner circle often publicly spoke of the return of the Hidden Imam, also known as the Twelfth Imam, the messianic saviour who would bring about justice through an Islamic new world order.⁹⁵ The Twelfth Imam has been a crucial element to Iran’s resistance narrative, historically used as a mobilisation of grassroots support during the revolutionary period.⁹⁶ The Mahdi, who will rid the world of injustice and evil, is predicted to return before the Day of Judgement according to Shi’a ‘Twelver’ teachings.⁹⁷ Mohebat Ahdiyih explains that while the Mahdi is mostly referred to in the Islamic context, similar concepts have significance in Iranian culture beyond Shi’a Islam. “The idea of the Mahdi has historical precedence, for example, in ancient Zoroastrian beliefs. Persian culture and poetry are awash with the notion of a promised saviour.”⁹⁸ Twelvers tell of a scenario in which Imam Mahdi vanquishes the forces of evil through inspiring confrontation, directly analogous to Islam’s confrontation with the West.⁹⁹

It is true that the rhetoric of resistance from the government masked real hardship felt by ordinary Iranians. Though President Ahmadinejad denied that sanctions were having any effect on Iran, the Iranian people felt their full force. A Gallup poll conducted in 2012 showed that sanctions were increasingly impacting the everyday living of Iranians, to the extent

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Eskander Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, “Gharbzadeghi, Colonial Capitalism, and the Racial State in Iran,” *Postcolonial Studies* 24, no. 2, (2021): 173-194.

⁹² “Iran: Ahmadinejad Sees Western Sanctions as ‘Psycho War,’” *Khabar Online*, April 23, 2013, accessed date June, 2024. <https://english.khabaronline.ir/news/184642/Ahmadinejad-Sees-Western-Sanctions-as-Psycho-War>

⁹³ Borszik, “International Sanctions Against Iran,” 10.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁹⁵ Afshin Shahi, “Paradoxes of Iranian Messianic Politics,” *Digest of Middle Eastern Studies* 21, no. 1 (2012) 109.

⁹⁶ Cara Hinkson, “The Messianic Idea in Shi’I Islam and its Modern Politicization,” *Arena Journal* 43, no. 44 (2015): 136.

⁹⁷ Mohebat Ahdiyih, “Ahmadinejad and the Mahdi,” *Middle East Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (2008): 28.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Kazemzadeh, “Ahmadinejad’s Foreign Policy,” 441.

that almost half of those surveyed (48%) worried about paying for food and shelter in the previous year.¹⁰⁰ Western leaders had hoped to “engage ordinary Iranians”¹⁰¹ and capitalise on their dissent against the Iranian leadership by weakening it with sanctions. However, Iranian approval of Western leaders and policy remained as low as 8% in both 2011 and 2012, revealing that public dissatisfaction with the Iranian leadership did not translate to increased support for Western action.¹⁰² Iranians also overwhelmingly attributed worsening pollution in urban areas to Western sanctions. In 2010, US sanctions targeting gasoline production forced Tehran to turn petrochemical plants into makeshift refineries in order to account for lost imports.¹⁰³ An unofficial report in December attributed 2,500 deaths to this bout of pollution, with Iran’s health minister noting “an 18% increase in emergency room admissions with heart problems and a 30% increase for respiratory problems.”¹⁰⁴ This report exacerbated the public’s anger, who attributed the pollution to the widespread use of the poorly refined Iranian-produced gasoline that was being produced as a direct result of sanctions¹⁰⁵

As such, there was significant dissent that did not go unnoticed by the leadership. Part of the response to this dissent was to make sanctions subversion as effective as possible and was baked into the economic resistance policy – a focus on building effective domestic economic production and further exploit smuggling routes to lessen the economic impact of sanctions on Iranian households. Another part of the response was a heavy crackdown against dissent. The 2009 election and marches in solidarity with Egyptians and Tunisians during the 2011 Arab Spring were met with mass arrests and violence. As governments had been toppled in the Middle East without a suitably swift response to economic issues, this only solidified the Islamic Republic’s need to be in near total control of the economy¹⁰⁶ and crack down on counter-revolution wherever it occurred. This would be a strategy the leadership would return to after the US withdrawal from the JCPOA.

The changes to domestic production and petrochemical conversions of the Ahmadinejad era provided a clear economic roadmap for the government to resist the Trump administrations Maximum Pressure campaign. Economic growth was predictably slower in the 2018/19 fiscal year and slowed even further in 2019/20, thanks to both sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰⁷ But the US government’s shift from a policy of coercion to effectively a policy of containment prevented any form of capitulation despite the severe economic consequences. It is at this point that Iran doubles-down on a strategy of ‘anti-containment,’ engaging more forcefully in the policies the US outlined in the Maximum Pressure sanctions. Azizi et al. describe this as a kind of asymmetric warfare and deterrence deployed by revisionist states to “overcome [their much more powerful] opponent’s strength and benefit from their vulnerabilities.”¹⁰⁸ They also note that Iran has made resistance a core part of its

¹⁰⁰ Steve Crabtree, “Iranians Expect to Feel Sanctions; Many More Had Troubles Paying for Food and Shelter Last Year,” *Gallup Poll News Service*, February 7, 2012, accessed date June, 2024. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/152510/iranians-expect-feel-sanctions.aspx>

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Farnaz Fassihi, “Iranians Blame Smog on Wests Sanctions,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2010, accessed date June, 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703727804576011722938628008>

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 303-305.

¹⁰⁷ “Iran’s Economic Update – April 2020,” *The World Bank*, April 16, 2020, accessed date June, 2024. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/publication/economic-update-april-2020>

¹⁰⁸ Azizi, Golmohammadi and Vaxirian, “Trump’s “maximum pressure” and anti-containment in Iran’s Regional Policy,” 153.

anti-containment strategy, evolving from a revolutionary slogan to a “strategic concept.”¹⁰⁹

But while Azizi et al. describe this phenomenon through the realist concept of power balancing,¹¹⁰ the government’s framing of resistance in terms of civilisation, race and subalternism suggests that a postcolonial justification was key to its transition as a strategic concept. It is worth noting that realist theory is often considered a major justification for sanctions in the first place, as their successes hinge on the receiving state conducting a cost-benefit analysis based on relative economic and geopolitical gains. Iranian officials often communicated that its resistance to neo-colonial domination through sanctions outweighs many of its other economic and political considerations. Iran has also made clear that it would not consider diplomacy if it contributes to the idea that sanctions, are an effective tool. In September 2019, Ayatollah Ali Khomeini made a statement saying “Negotiating would mean Washington imposing its demands on Tehran... Their objective in [offering to hold] talks is to prove to everyone that the policy of maximum pressure has yielded results, and that Iranian authorities were forced to come to the negotiating table despite what they said.”¹¹¹

This kind of framing continued in the years following, even as Iran’s economic health deteriorated. In September of 2020, well into the COVID-19 pandemic, President Rouhani described the re-imposition of sanctions as “futile” and that Iran would give a “crushing response to America’s bullying.”¹¹² The new government under Ebrahim Raisi, who took office in 2021, continued attempts to rescue the JCPOA but noted the government would not “back off from the Iranian people’s nuclear rights... not even an iota.” At his first address to the UN General Assembly in September of 2022, he also clearly framed sanctions a weapon against the subaltern “Sanctions are a punishment for seeking justice and independence of the Iranian nation. Sanction is a weapon of mass murder, and accompanying or remaining silent towards it is aiding and abetting oppression.”¹¹³ In a 2023 meeting with Belarusian Alexander Lukashenko, Khamenei called for more solidarity in resisting Western sanctions. “The countries that have been sanctioned by the United States must cooperate with each other and form a united front to destroy the weapon of sanctions. We believe that such a thing is achievable.”¹¹⁴

As much as this resistance narrative is an elite level discourse that attempts to solidify government power, similar narratives have been reflected in public opinion. In October 2019, *IranPoll*¹¹⁵ found that public opinion had shifted dramatically on Iran’s relations with foreign powers. Attitudes towards the JCPOA fell below fifty percent for the first time and a policy of nuclear enrichment in excess of the limits of the agreement became significantly more popular. At its highest, approval for the agreement was over 75 percent. However, a diplomatic resolution to the impasse over *any* of the US’s policy concerns was also unpopular. 58 percent of Iranians opposed extending the agreement to allow for negotiations under any

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 156.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ “Ayatollah Khamenei: No talks with US; Maximum Pressure Campaign Futile,” *Press TV*, September 17, 2019, accessed date April, 2024. <https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2019/09/17/606389/Iran-Ayatollah%C3%82%C2%A0Seyyed-Ali-Khamenei-US-talks>

¹¹² “Iran vows ‘crushing response to US bullying’ after sanctions announcement,” *BBC News*, September 21, 2020, accessed date April, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-54227052>

¹¹³ “Year One: Raisi on the Nuclear Deal,” *The Iran Primer*, September 21, 2022, accessed date April, 2024. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2022/sep/14/year-one-raisi-nuclear-deal>

¹¹⁴ “Ayatollah Khamenei Urges Concerted Action against US Sanctions,” *Tasnim News Agency*, March 14, 2023, accessed date April, 2024. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2023/03/14/2867433/ayatollah-khamenei-urges-concerted-action-against-us-sanctions>

¹¹⁵ *IranPoll* is an independent Canadian opinion research company that focussed on Iran. In the 2019 polls, they partnered with the Centre for International and Security Studies Maryland (CISSM) at the University of Maryland.

circumstances, while only a third endorsed an extension based on sanctions relief.¹¹⁶ If this poll is reflective of larger sentiment in Iran at the time, it shows both a dissatisfaction with sanctions as a policy of US interference and a support of political resistance – not diplomacy – as the solution. The poll also showed that Iranians were very concerned over the economy, despite their opposition to negotiations with the United States. Though a majority had a favourable opinion of revolutionary institutions like the IRGC¹¹⁷ and the economic approach of the Ahmadinejad era had provided a somewhat effective framework to insulate the regime from meaningful dissent. They were also not afraid to crack down on protest, particularly evidenced by the response to the ‘Bloody November’ protests of 2019 over fuel prices.¹¹⁸ Those who were arrested or killed were accused of collaborating with the CIA in a conspiracy.

Iran entered a brutal recession in early 2020 due to the COVID pandemic, but by FY 20-21 it had returned to modest growth driven predominantly by its oil industry recovery and services.¹¹⁹ The government has since framed this as proof that the resistance economy is a sustainable way forward, given that a diplomatic solution seems so far off. Though the Iranian economy in 2021 was far from healthy, with consumer inflation reaching 43.3% and labour force participation at 41.4%, which is still significantly lower than pre-pandemic levels.¹²⁰

5. Discussion and Concussion

Prior to the popular uprisings following Mahsa Amini’s death in 2022, scholars were almost universally critical of the impact of sanctions on Iran – both on policy and humanitarian grounds. Nader Habibi criticises the intensification of Western sanctions since 2011, specifically in relation to the harm they caused the population.¹²¹ He claims that the West was “no longer interested in pressuring the regime without causing humanitarian suffering... Sanctions have affected the entire economy of Iran and ordinary citizens are suffering as a result of them.”¹²² He notes that the worsening economy plays into the hands of the political establishment, leading to the consolidation of significant economic resources by the IRGC and a subsequent militarisation of the Iranian economy that may be difficult to reverse for reformists.¹²³

Mahmoud Reza Golshanpazooch and Marzieh Kouhi Esfahani go as far as characterising the Islamic Republic’s maintenance of its soft power as skilful, considering the scope and magnitude of sanctions.¹²⁴ They argue that Iran has been able to do this by maintaining and nurturing its main cultural pillars; Persian civilisation, Islamic culture and anti-Westernism.¹²⁵

¹¹⁶ Nancy Gallagher, Ebrahim Mohseni, and Clay Ramsay, *Iranian Public Opinion under Maximum Pressure*, (Maryland: Centre for International and Security Studies Maryland, 2019), 4.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Babak Dehghanpisheh, “Iran says 200,000 took to streets in anti-government protests,” *Reuters*, November 28, 2019, accessed date June, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-protests/iran-says-200000-took-to-streets-in-anti-government-protests-idUSKBN1Y11PE/>

¹¹⁹ Majid Kazemi Najaf Abadi and Razieh Zahedi, “Iran Economic Monitor – Adapting to the New Normal: A Protracted Pandemic and Ongoing Economic Sanctions,” *World Bank Group*, October 1, 2021, accessed date April, 2024. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/publication/iran-economic-monitor-fall-2021>

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Nader Habibi in Parvin Alizadeh and Hassan Hakimian ed., *Iran, and the Global Economy: Petro Populism, Islam, and Economic Sanctions* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 194.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Mahmoud Reza Golshanpazooch and Marzieh Kouhi Esfahani, “Culture, the Core of Soft Power: An Overview of Iran’s Cultural Component of Soft Power,” *Hemispheres* 29, no. 4 (2014): 88.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Indeed, scholars like Afshin Shahi and Mohebat Ahdiyyih also see these factors as a priority for the government's maintenance of unity in light of sanctions. The integration of messianic politics through Twelver Shi'ism, while puzzling to many Iranians, did fit neatly into the imperial resistance messaging. The resistance narrative constructed by the elite acted as an important aspect of Iran's foreign policy, including resisting economic coercion.

Yet, it is clear that the political project of this resistance should not be confused with other emancipatory projects of postcolonial politics. Ramin Jahanbegloo sees the actions of the government as undermining its narrative of solidarity for the downtrodden. The conditions created by sanctions caused Ahmadinejad's administration to enter a crisis of legitimacy as its "violent repression against Iranian civil society and the fractures within Iran's ruling class have eroded the image of the government as the vanguard of resistance against oppressors in the Muslim World."¹²⁶ With the Arab Spring dissolving autocratic governments all around Iran, the 'rally around the flag' effect that sanctions had on Ahmadinejad's popularity in the short-term could not erase the question of legitimacy that loomed over his administration.

In the Maximum Pressure era of Trump, the return to postcolonial narratives was essential for consolidating the power of the Iranian state. However, Iran's resistance to this round of sanctions is meaningfully different from the Ahmadinejad era. The pre-JCPOA secondary sanctions were only part of the US engagement strategy, with bilateral discussions supplementing economic pressure. This "carrot-and-stick" approach dealt a heavy economic toll but promised a reintegration into the global financial system once Iran became compliant. Importantly this included concessions from the US that made it to the deal, such as allowing Iran to enrich Uranium on its own soil. Contrary to previous measures, these negotiations treated Iran as a peer – not a recalcitrant pariah.

Maximum Pressure sanctions reflected a return to a strategy of isolating Iran unless a grand bargain was reached. Though Iran was initially rewarded for complying with nuclear non-proliferation guidelines through the JCPOA, for the Trump administration this was no longer good enough. As Pardis Gheibi points out, "the economic relief – or 'carrot' in the carrot-and-stick regime – lost some of its attractiveness for Iran."¹²⁷ This not only means that Iran is reluctant to take the US at their word in future negotiations, it also means they have little reason not to weather US sanctions for as long as possible. In fact, Iran has made attempts to expand its demands beyond nuclear sanctions on several occasions in its negotiations with the Biden administration.¹²⁸

The Iranian state's resistance of US sanctions has clear parallels to Zimbabwe's Chimurenga policies. There is a similar targeting of elites with sanctions policy and a desire on the part of the government to frame resisting them as a moral obligation. The similarities are particularly stark in the Mugabe era, as his Chimurenga both emphasised external exploitation in an effort to mask local injustices and corruption perpetrated by the government.¹²⁹ There are also similar framings of sanctions as a 'blunt weapon' of oppressors present in Iranian discourses.¹³⁰ Just like the Chimurenga, the resistance doctrine informed a

¹²⁶ Ramin Jahanbegloo, "Iran and the Democratic Struggle in the Middle East," *Middle East Law and Governance* 3, no. 1-2 (2011): 126-135.

¹²⁷ Gheibi, "The rise and fall of US secondary Sanctions," 438.

¹²⁸ Doina Chiacu, "Iran adds demands in nuclear talks, enrichment 'alarming' – US envoy," *Reuters*, July 6, 2022, accessed date April, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-envoy-iran-adds-demands-nuclear-talks-makes-alarming-progress-enrichment-2022-07-05/>

¹²⁹ Mararike, "Zimbabwe Economic Sanctions and Post-Colonial Hangover," (2019) 29.

¹³⁰ "Sanctions are 'US way of war,' Iranian President at UN," *UN News*, September 21, 2018, accessed date April, 2024. <https://>

modification of security and political institutions that provided a direction for public anger, but also a justification for state responses to it.

Since Trump, the Biden administration has relaxed some of the Maximum Pressure sanctions on Iran and some diplomatic inroads were made. However, this has done little to address the ineffectiveness of sanctions as policy coercion tool against Iran. Through responding to US sanctions by institutionalising postcolonial rhetoric, Iran has created a framework for resisting external hegemonic forces. President Raisi has expressed his desire to expand this project internationally, calling for expanded Central Asian economic and security cooperation in order to thwart “draconian” US sanctions¹³¹ and signing an economic cooperation deal with the United Arab Emirates.¹³²

Even following the death of Mahsa Amini and the Women Life Freedom protests, when the government’s legitimacy has been at its most vulnerable for decades, the Iranian state has been able to continue and justify a path of resistance. As we have seen, the postcolonial discourses of the government serve the purpose of statecraft, not the Iranian people. But this does not mean that past oppressions and exploitations cannot be drawn upon and institutionalised in order to resist future “oppressions.”

US justification for sanctions often ignores the perception of hegemony in the Islamic Republic and their historical relationship with Western Power. Iranian officials saw events like the hostage crisis as an “act of national assertiveness, of Iran standing up and taking charge of its own destiny. The humiliation of 1953 was exorcised by the taking of American hostages in 1979.”¹³³ This is the way Iranian officials wish to characterise foreign policy from the revolution on – to cooperate or retaliate on its own terms, returning its dignity while manifesting its identity and national prosperity.

Exploring postcoloniality and sanctions in Iran is fraught with issues. On the one hand, Iranians have undoubtedly had a colonial experience with external powers in their recent collective memories. This must be acknowledged and appreciated when it comes to how the formulation of sanctions policy and coercive economic policies impacts those on the ground. On the other, it is also clear that elites in the Islamic Republic utilise postcoloniality to justify policies that undermine the wellbeing and agency of Iranians, for the purpose of consolidating the power of the state resisting coercion.

Though there are also clear *realpolitik* justifications for sanctions resistance – especially following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. Iran is forced to resist sanctions, as a capitulation results in a significant reduction in its power and security in relative terms to the US. But what *realpolitik* assessments of Iran’s counter-sanctions policies do not acknowledge is that decades of attempted economic coercion against Iran have necessitated a relative immunity to them in the Iranian economy and society. The framing of sanctions as not just ineffective, but *unjust* and tantamount to colonial domination of those who would resist colonisers, was a deliberate discursive effort to mobilise the state around resistance. The result is a clear policy of resistance to Western economic coercion that is more than just

news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1100572

¹³¹ “Iran’s Raisi says thwarting U.S. sanctions needs new solutions,” *Reuters*, September 16, 2022, accessed date April, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/irans-raisi-says-thwarting-us-sanctions-needs-new-solutions-2022-09-16/>

¹³² “Iran top official reveals an economic agreement with UAE,” *Middle East Monitor*, March 20, 2023, accessed date April, 2024. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230320-iran-top-official-reveals-an-economic-agreement-with-uae/>

¹³³ Vali Nasr in Steven Kinzer, “Inside Iran’s Fury,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, October, 2008, accessed date September 4, 2023. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/inside-irans-fury-11823881/>

rhetorical – it provided a clear roadmap for the survival of the Islamic Republic. Therefore, if sanctions against Iran continue to justify and confirm this characterisation of sanctions, they will continue to be ineffective.

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