

Determining the Effectiveness of Sanctions on Iran

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Brief Analysis

In the aftermath of President Barack Obama's disclosure of the existence of Iran's secret uranium enrichment plant, sanctions will remain widely discussed unless unexpected progress is made at the October 1 meeting in Geneva between Iran and the P5+1. Until now, talks have focused on specific measures, such as sanctions on refined gas, insurance, reinsurance, and additional Iranian banks. The most basic issues, however -- the purpose and goal of sanctions and the priorities of the Iranian leadership -- are often lost sight of in such a debate. For the United States and its allies, the key to success will be to articulate these fundamental issues and then use guiding principles to determine subsequent action.

What Are Sanctions Meant to Achieve?

The primary aim of the sanctions under consideration is to force Iran's hand on the nuclear impasse, although they may have other effects, such as supporting creative diplomacy, slowing down Iran's nuclear program, and stopping Iran's support of terrorism. The gravity and efficacy of any sanction should not be measured by how damaging it is to Iran, but instead in what prospects it offers for inducing Iran's leaders to change course on the nuclear program or to achieve parallel objectives. While crippling the Iranian economy is not in itself a goal, it may become the only means possible to change Iran's nuclear direction.

The last three months have shown that Iran's hardliners have a higher priority -- staying in power -- than the welfare of the Iranian people, and they may not be affected at all by sanctions that impose great costs on ordinary Iranians. Only sanctions that threaten the leadership's hold on power will likely lead to a fundamental change in their uncompromising position on the nuclear program. Such sanctions may offer better prospects for affecting their strategic calculus than do simple economic measures that offer opportunities for those in power, such as the Revolutionary Guard, to profit from sanctions busting. To be sure, other objectives, such as slowing Iran's nuclear program, may well argue for taking a variety of other steps at the same time.

Demonstrating that Hardline Policies Do Not Work

Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad has justified his foreign policy by saying that his strategy has been successful while Iran's previous policies of accommodation toward the West have failed. In his June 4 televised debate with Mir Hossein Mousavi, Ahmadinezhad said that Muhammad Khatami's detente policy "led to the shutdown of our nuclear facilities and imposition of two protocols [UN Security Council resolutions imposing sanctions] on the Iranian nation ... and seven resolutions were adopted in the governors board of the IAEA." He then continued: "In the course of twenty-seven years in which you, Rafsanjani, and Khatami have run the country, the United States used a regime change policy, but now America officially announces that it does not have regime change policy for Iran." His point was that his foreign policy had less cost and more benefits than Iran's previous policies.

In the same debate, Mousavi said that the current policies "damage the dignity of Iran, tarnish its reputation, and cause lots of tension with other countries." He argued that the consequences of Ahmadinezhad's defiant foreign policies would be grave and devastating for Iran.

The United States has an interest in proving Mousavi correct -- and Ahmadinezhad wrong -- by demonstrating that defiant policies have a price and that accommodating policies bring benefits. This idea is particularly important in the aftermath of the June 12 election. The United States wants to engage Iran and at the same time avoid legitimizing Ahmadinezhad. One way to do this is to combine engagement with sanctions, so long as Iran refuses to fulfill the requirements of UN Security Council resolutions. Any new sanctions should be presented as the logical consequences of Ahmadinezhad's confrontational policies.

Widening the Gap Between the People and the Regime

For twenty years, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has consistently said that the greatest threat to the Islamic Republic is a Western cultural invasion, which could lead women, youth, and intellectuals to spark a velvet revolution. Khamenei and his cadre offer the events since the June election as proof of these dangers.

Imposing sanctions on human rights violations is an effective way to widen the gap between the people and the Iranian regime. Such sanctions can be of dual use when those most responsible for the continuation of the nuclear and missile programs -- which the Security Council has ordered suspended -- are also those most responsible for repression in Iran. If such sanctions are to be approved by the Security Council, it may be necessary that the debate emphasize counterproliferation in order to secure Russian and Chinese support. The United States and others can highlight the human rights aspect once the resolution has passed.

Moreover, in the face of human rights abuses, the EU and the United States have several times issued human rights sanctions without UN backing, such as in the cases of Burma and Zimbabwe. These types of sanctions are generally more effective if they are endorsed by many industrialized countries, which is a possibility in this case. Canada, for instance, is highly vocal about human rights abuses in Iran. To implement non-UN-backed sanctions on Iran, the United States would almost certainly require new executive orders that would serve to underscore the gravity with which Obama views the Iran problem.

Iranian reformers have been afraid that the international community will adopt sanctions for nuclear -- not human rights -- reasons. In some respects, the reformers are quite correct; sanctions that would most likely secure Chinese and Russian support in the Security Council would be focused on the nuclear program. Moreover, Europe and the United States care much more about the nuclear impasse than they do about Iranian democracy. But the two issues are not entirely separate. The international community -- or just the West -- may decide that sanctions, by widening the split between the hardline rulers and the people, would affect the strategic reasoning of Iran's leaders.

Prospects for Success

One of the great difficulties in inducing Iran to change its nuclear policies is that Khamenei and his associates seemingly believe that the West will pursue the overthrow of the Islamic Republic no matter what happens. Ahmadinezhad, on the other hand, seems more optimistic; he thinks the international community will allow Iran to pursue its present policies, and therefore welcomes engagement because he expects the West to capitulate. That eventuality, however, seems unlikely.

If the Iranian regime were willing to agree to a nuclear deal that is acceptable to the West, the United States and its allies might well be prepared to abandon the Iranian democratic movement. This consequence, however, may not be too problematic for the Iranian democratic cause. Iran's leaders may be reading the situation correctly: they worry that the incentives proposed by the West, such as enhanced economic interaction and opportunities for Iranians to cooperate with their Western colleagues, are in fact a Trojan horse. Indeed, if a resolution to the nuclear impasse led to a greater opening of Iran to the outside world, the outcome might well be a strengthening of all the elements in Iranian society that undermine the hardline regime's grip on power.

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