

IRAN UNDER SANCTIONS



Entanglements:
Lives Lived
Under Sanctions

ARZOO OSANLOO



ABOUT IRAN UNDER SANCTIONS

Iran's economy has been under sanctions in one form or another since the 1979 revolution. Yet little systematic knowledge exists on the short- and medium-term impacts of sanctions on the growth patterns of the Iranian economy, the general welfare of its people in the cities and rural areas, societal dynamics, civic space, and the country's environment. The focus has often been on a few metrics that flare up with tightening of sanctions: currency depreciation, inflation, and recession, which are then followed by increases in unemployment and poverty. But the more comprehensive picture is lost in political cacophony around the policy's merits. This is the gap that SAIS is filling with its Iran Under Sanctions project, which is a 360-degree in-depth view on the implications of sanctions on Iran. This first-of-its-kind research provides for an instructive case study on the use of sanctions as a tool of statecraft. For any questions or feedback on the project, please reach out to Ali Vaez at avaez2@jh.edu.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 04 INTRODUCTION
- 06 ENTANGLEMENTS BORN OF ALIENATION
- 09 RULE OF LAW IS TO ECONOMIC WARFARE AS
DIPLOMATIC TOOL IS TO COLLECTIVE
PUNISHMENT
- 13 SHOCK THERAPY: TO SHOCK AND SHOCK AGAIN
- 16 SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE ON U.S. AND LINKING
THE NUCLEAR ISSUE TO PEOPLES' LIVELIHOODS
- 20 ECONOMIC PRECARITY: FROM WORKING CLASS
TO WORKING POOR
- 23 ECONOMIC PIVOT: FROM REVOLUTIONARY
ECONOMY TO ENDURANCE ECONOMY
- 26 ENDURING LIVES: THE SLOW VIOLENCE
OF SANCTIONS
- 29 CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

I started to gather news, perceptions, opinions, and reflections about the effects of sanctions on my Iranian interlocutors during the summer of 2015, shortly after Iran and the P5+1 (the permanent members of the UN Security Council – China, France, Russia, the UK, and U.S., plus Germany) signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an agreement on the Iran nuclear program. On the plane over that August, I noted an immediate optical change with regard to this once and often isolated state. For the first time in the two decades that I had been making annual trips to Iran, the plane was full, occupied by non-Iranians, many of them business people seeking to secure ventures in a country ripe for investment potential.

As my taxi drove out of Imam Khomeini airport, I spotted the new Ibex hotel chain just off the main entrance. The driver chuckled mischievously as he told me about the lack of signage, “a forgotten order or a missed flight, or something”, and I began to sense that a new, lighter mood had taken over the people with whom I came into contact. Shortly after the nuclear deal was announced in July 2015 and even before it went into effect six months later, the Iranian rial had begun to gain value against the U.S. dollar and the euro. My Iranian friends started making life-al-

tering plans for improving their futures: investing in businesses, education, and economic opportunities that were coming their way. One found full-time employment at a Dutch engineering firm that had set up a satellite site in Tehran. It paid a wage that allowed him, at 32, to plan to move out of his family’s three-bedroom apartment in central Tehran for the first time. Another, a student of pharmacology, a field with few PhD programs in Iran or the region, could look to Western universities to pursue her doctorate. A third decided to open a business designing manteaus, the government-regulated female public attire – a growing and dynamic industry with many creative female designers. And a fourth, a writer for Iran’s national radio, *Seda*, began to write programs for her own podcast, hoping to broadcast through international platforms to Persian speakers across the globe. Everyone I encountered that summer, it seemed, had big plans for their future.

Although not a part of my research project at the time, I kept notes of these conversations and followed-up with my interlocutors. When I returned the following years, I heard incremental bits of continued hopefulness, but also suspicion due to the slow progress on removal of trade barriers and on promised international financing. By the summer of 2018, things

had taken a dramatic turn for the worse. In May, the Trump administration had announced its intention to withdraw from the JCPOA. Even though the actual repercussions were not due to take effect until November of that year, it left my interlocutors numb with caution and dread.

True to their concerns, by 2019, the effects of sanctions – lack of trade, access to goods and financial services – were beginning to take hold and touch the everyday lives of every one of my interlocutors in some way. The Dutch firm where one worked announced plans to leave Iran and lay-off its workers, thus delaying his marriage and apartment hunting. The student who sought a PhD abroad had to change her plan abruptly; even if she could get a visa, already a very big if, she could no longer afford the enterprise, because the rial had plummeted, reducing her funds by a third.

In spite of this, several of my interlocutors braved the uncertainty with ingenuity in their business practices and aspirations. The fashion designer fared better, turning to less expensive textiles, traveling to India to buy her fabric. Still, she was forced to raise prices to cover expenses and properly value her artistic creations, which meant catering to wealthier clients who would be less forgiving of fabrics she chose, her cutting-edge style, and the designer price tags. The radio broadcaster pursued her podcasts but was left using lesser-known platforms that reached fewer listeners.

Each of my interlocutors had become subject to living under sanctions in some way, as the measures affected the commodity chains and flows of capital that each relied on to further their endeavors. Politics, laws, policies, securitization, communications, and human lives were bound together by finance and investment through which human endeavors come to fruition and become commodities for trade. Examining these through commodities, such as medicine, durable goods, agricultural products, minerals, and, of course, petroleum resources, as well as the financial services that help to move trade, illuminates the changing conditions of life in times of sanctions, precarity, and alienation.

ENTANGLEMENTS BORN OF ALIENATION

In this essay, I suggest that the contemporary sanctions policy and resulting situation in Iran reflect neoliberal governance and a history of legality in the service of post-colonial empire. Sanctions are an everyday presence, both real and imagined, that shapes life and social relations, as well as perceptions of choices, in both present and future aspirations.

Iran's shift from a mere isolated country to one whose population must withstand the stresses of sanctions that are "targeted" and "smart", but also, the overwhelming sense of "maximum pressure", weave through and shape human relationships, aspirations, desires, and even tastes. In this way, sanctions are not just economic pressure, but also "entanglements born of alienation" rather than engagement (Tsing, p. 133). That phrase refers to capitalist processes necessary to transform the natural or physical world into objects or commodities for trade. Resources, such as petroleum, are separated or alienated from their sources in the natural world so they can be commodified and traded on the global market. The entanglements that emerge are those of a global economy driven by neoliberal economic policies,

the consumption needs of consumers, and a government's or private corporation's desire to profit from its supply by selling in foreign markets.

In the Iranian case, the entanglements born of capitalist alienation and accumulation are further enmeshed in global politics. Alienation takes on a more mundane meaning, that of isolation, wrought by some, mostly Western, powers that seek to punish Iran, which they deem to be a rogue state or "state sponsor of terrorism". This isolation, they claim, will bring about meaningful change in Iranian policies, especially in the region.

Having entanglements born of alienation thus alludes both to alienation of resources from the natural world for global capitalist trade and finance *and* to being cut off from those very markets by powers that seek to isolate Iran. As such powers make use of and even devise new bodies and international laws in the service of this isolation, they can claim to be adhering to law, while devastating Iran's domestic economy; they can applaud their diplomatic efforts, while ordinary Iranians absorb their crushing effects. Together, these

processes can also be described as a form of “institutionalized alienation” (Tsing, p. 255). In this way, too, the numerous entanglements born of alienation affect everyday life, including neoliberalism, economic warfare, the persistent threat of a hot war, and the resulting securitization as the political backdrop to the contemporary projects intended to alienate and isolate Iran – in other words, maximum pressure.

Thus, I examine sanctions not from the standpoint of the Iranian economy, which scholars in preceding publications for this project have explored. Instead, I consider the human costs of this institutionalized alienation and precarity, that is, the social effects of sanctions, even those effects that my interlocutors may not be able to pinpoint as directly related to or produced by the economic impact of sanctions.

None of the stories that follow exist in a vacuum, an isolated framework, or a context removed from broader geopolitics and political economy. Instead, I suggest, sanctions are not external to neoliberalism, but part of its moral-market project (Whyte). They are not exceptional to, but inherent in, neoliberal policies that have impacted the world (Brown; Harvey). The international legal framework structures and disciplines the political interests of elites (Chimni; Reus-Smit). These actors have used international law to facilitate the sanctions regime that accelerates and intensifies neoliberal processes (Klein). In Iran, neoliberalism is unleashed by max-

imum pressure that amplifies its effects through cumulative impacts of multiple processes, such as political isolation and prohibitions on selling oil and gas. Thus, while the effects may seem totalizing to those experiencing them, they are really force multipliers.

I explore how sanctions have forced many Iranians to reconsider their social relationships, ideas of themselves, aspirations, hopes for the future, and ultimately, what it means to be an Iranian living under a tactical network of sanctions intended to harm them as part of a broader plan to weaken their government. While sanctions affect them directly and palpably, they are often so diffuse as to avert direct causal links to their everyday impacts. I seek to explore the implications of economic warfare on human beings and their social relations: how sanctions condition possibilities of short- and long-term growth on the capacities and endeavors of human beings.

Experiences of alienation and precarity vary according to differing contexts and countries, given the distinct experiences each has with neoliberal policies, reforms, and politics. Iran’s experiences are distinguishable, for instance, from those of Haiti or Chile, which have suffered from neoliberal reforms, through structural adjustment policies, and a different kind of political control. In the Iranian case, it is important to consider the country’s emergence as a pariah state since the late

1970s, while also remembering the 1950s, when it was embargoed for nationalizing its oil and first acquired its reputation for recalcitrance and defiance of the Euro-American world order.

The resulting conditions of life – alienation and precarity – emerge from the confluence of a number of factors: neoliberalism, Iran’s status, according to Western elite governments, of a pariah or rogue state which must be made to heel, and the tools of international law that are used to weaken it politically and economically so as to create a compliant state and population.

Iran’s shift from a mere isolated country to one whose population must withstand the stresses of sanctions that are “targeted” and “smart”, but also, the overwhelming sense of “maximum pressure”, weave through and shape human relationships, aspirations, desires, and even tastes.

RULE OF LAW IS TO ECONOMIC WARFARE AS DIPLOMATIC TOOL IS TO COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT

“Apply this economic, peaceful, silent, deadly remedy, and there will be no need for force”.
-Woodrow Wilson, U.S. President, 1919

“They lack humanity and their effect – no matter the stated aim – is to slowly kill us”.
-Maryam, Iranian citizen, 2019¹

To explore how Iranians experience these entanglements born of economic and geopolitical alienation, I step back to provide a bit of context and consider some broader debates around the meaning of sanctions as a tool of international diplomacy. To add historical context, I begin this section by juxtaposing the above quotes from the opposite ends of the political and temporal spectrum: a U.S. president and a working-class Iranian woman, 100 years apart.

Wilson’s utterance – economic yet silent, peaceful while deadly – described contradictions that persist. The vantage point and audience for the president in the pre-internet telecommunications of the early twentieth century, could not have been other than his own compatriots and Western elites, who after the horrors of World War I’s trench warfare, sought a remedy for international disputes that would bring an end to sending their husbands and sons to the front. Their imaginations, however,

did not extend the “deadly” effects of the sanctions they imposed on less wealthy, less powerful nations and their people. A century later, Maryam rejected the fantasy that sanctions involve no force. Her words ask us to consider how the dream of ending the use of military measures has itself transformed into a new kind of force that inflicts its own slow violence through necropolitics (Mbembe).²

Whether sanctions are a diplomatic tool or collective punishment of civilians has long been debated. The Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, writing in 1967 about the case of Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), noted that sanctions cause people to rally around their government in search of support. In this way, sanctions allow authoritarian states to appear magnanimous, by showering their populations with compassion and mercy, even as they put down, sometimes violently (as in Iran in November 2019), their demands for rights-based equality and other guarantees based on their common humanity. Galtung assailed the logic of inflicting maximum harm on a country’s economy, arguing that people adapt and may rally around their leaders, and claimed, “The collective nature of economic sanctions makes them hit the innocent along with the guilty” (p. 390).

While Wilson famously said that sanctions were meant to be a diplomatic tool, we have seen cases in recent years in Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Venezuela, and North Korea – all countries in the Global South – in which such measures have been used in seeming

perpetuity to bring rogue or mischievous states to heel. In none of these cases, however, has the stated result been achieved. Instead, we see a hollowing out of a sovereign state’s economy, social services, and welfare system alongside a hardening of its police and security apparatuses. In the international arena, we can also perceive growing alliances, trade, and diplomacy between these countries and more powerful and strategic actors, notably China and Russia.³

Although stated goals may be regime reform or even regime change, the more apparent aims seem to point to regime collapse, perhaps to pave the way, under the guise of liberating an oppressed people, for the “cake walk” style of intervention that was supposed to be Iraq. Sanctions against Iran during the Trump administration transformed into an all-out assault, signified by the phrase “maximum pressure”, which referred not only to the never-ending stream of unilateral measures, but also to a series of impacts affecting the population as a whole. Included were targeted sanctions directed at individuals and businesses, a ban on Iran’s use of financial services, a prohibition on the sale of petroleum resources, cyber-attacks amounting to a low-grade war, and secondary sanctions on governments and corporations that defied the U.S. bans. Taken together these measures sought to weaken the government and suppress Iran’s influence in the region, especially in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

As former Secretary of State Pompeo touted the campaign's success, millions of Iranians felt the effects, which demoralized and depleted the working class, while strengthening the autocrats and the military elements who seek to rule with an increasingly iron fist. Many are experiencing the shock of economic devastation through lost career opportunities and livelihoods as well as increased housing and food insecurity, and even starvation. Yet, remarkable resilience and ingenuity are also visible.

Debates about the efficacy, ethics, and legality of sanctions often revisit Wilson's statement and the experience of the measures taken against communist countries during and after the Cold War, which were aimed at curbing threats to freedom and democracy in the West. Another wave of studies has argued sanctions' utility as a peaceful, if coercive, means to support internal movements against racist policies, such as those in South Africa. The international community has likewise valued sanctions as a mechanism to pressure countries for human rights violations (Cortright and Lopez). At times, such sanctions have also been effective in weakening states so as to make military intervention viable, while creating humanitarian catastrophes that blur the boundaries between illegal invasion and occupation – and humanitarian relief. Indeed, scholars have shown the permeability between war tactics and sanctions tactics (Gordon).

What Wilson could not have envisioned, and few scholars have studied, however, is the post-World War II supremacy of one country and its ability to crush another's economy through *unilateral* sanctions alone, without the active participation of a coalition. U.S. actions and the international community's apparent inability to respond productively to them suggest that international law is still the provenance of the most powerful (Hurd) and a means to consolidate and enforce the will of post-colonial imperialism (Anghie). Sanctions, I suggest, are a valuable component of the post-colonial toolkit.

My interlocutors in Iran often told me that they did not see the pressures on their country as comparable with those levied against Iraq. "No", said Hamid, a 32-year old engineer, "there was an international coalition". Up to a point, there was, at least prior to 9/11. Afterwards, the very clear U.S. aim was regime change and much of the coalition split. Even then, however, Washington did not act alone and its "coalition of the willing" sought legal legitimacy through the evocation of international law and the obligations nations possess to act in the face of potentially "imminent" harm. While the merits of the case may be debated, the U.S. did strive to justify its actions through a framework of international law.

One objective of this paper thus is to explore the impact of unilateral sanctions on

U.S. strategy to effect change. As relationships (and geopolitical interests) change, so, too, do strategies. Hamid said to me in July 2020, “what they want is total collapse. They want to sow division within the country, so that Iran can be divided up. But we are too strong, and the U.S. has its own problems now ... the children in cages, corona (COVID-19)”. While Iranians’ perceptions of U.S. dominance and its strategies shift, and there is little doubt about their suffering, questions remain about exactly who is made to bear the brunt of sanctions and in what ways.

SHOCK THERAPY: TO SHOCK AND SHOCK AGAIN

Naomi Klein argues that powerful international actors exploit and even create disasters (“shocks”) to institute change they expect to lead to greater compliance with the neoliberal world order. While these are often natural or environmental, shocks can also be administered by powerful states, as in the invasion of Iraq. Exploring this “shock therapy” is instructive as well for the case of maximum pressure against Iran. Sanctions do not always lead to the kinds of changes their authors say they desire. Despite the rhetoric that accompanies their implementation, their material impacts fall squarely on the very civilians they are said to be intended to avoid (Gordon, p. 124).

Shocks like the debt crisis, Katrina, or the OPEC oil crisis allow for a new beginning, a chance to push the proverbial restart button. The shock creates a “blank slate” so that the economic system can be rewritten and reworked; maximum pressure is an example. Although expressed otherwise, the results of sanctions allow

for purposeful shocks that lead to various forms of compliance: from economic to political. As Klein notes, the purpose of the shock is to allow for the privatization of public assets, banks, communications, healthcare, mines, and other resources, in order to create private markets. Integral to this process of shock and privatization is law, which advances the infrastructure of capitalism, property, communications, and trade, what has been referred to as a form of international “lawfare” – that is, as an instrument of political leverage or coercion (Comaroff and Comaroff). Techniques of lawfare are also part of a pronounced search for and codification of behaviors or governmental actions as criminal, to produce an international “specter of illegality” (Ibid, p. 273).

In the Iranian context, the economic shock of sanctions emerges through lawfare that has as its pinnacle a comprehensive global set of international criminal laws that include provisions for sanctioning “bad” nation-state actors, which can only be

mobilized by Western elites with the means to punish by law and economic exclusion. Iran – a country that has an ambivalent relationship with privatization and international legal and financial mechanisms of capitalism – is unable to access the private markets it requires to sell its resources and, in turn, make those tools (of capitalism) available for its suffering and increasingly restive citizens.

Sanctions imposed over decades create waves of shocks inhibiting long-term planning, international collaboration, or extensive capital investment. These deliberate and repeated surges of sanctions – not unlike austerity measures in neoliberal restructuring – amount to Klein’s economic shock therapy. The neoliberal shocks, with the variously introduced measures, operate at timed intervals to affect growing numbers of sectors with mandated government restructuring, loans as infusion of capital, and control of markets through privatization (Han).

In the Iranian case, we have to think about a different framework for the shock therapy – sanctions and thus lack of access – yet with a similar result, and with the express intention of isolating the government, its economy, and, intentional or not, the people. Instead of opening toward foreign direct investment, the country is excluded; rather than forced into restructuring and international financing loans for bailouts, the government is denied access to financial resources and infusions of capital and,

ultimately, compelled to currency devaluation that results in the plummeting of wealth, particularly for those without access to foreign currency. These effects are passed on to private citizens, thus mirroring the experience of citizens in countries that experience neoliberal restructuring. The results of the lack of circulation of capital, commodities, and trade, like those of austerity measures, are that people cannot be paid, pensions are slashed, and jobs are cut. Inequality increases particularly between those who have access to a different currency (and overseas bank accounts) and those who do not. In the case of sanctioned countries, citizens often face the added consequences of travel restrictions and lack of access to research, scientific and technological resources, and material goods and support (eg, parts and instruction), and, again, to financial resources. This is how the slow violence of sanctions, like neoliberal austerity measures, affects people who depend on wages or material and capital flows from abroad. As I will show below, those of my interlocutors who operated within internal economic strictures managed better than those with investments (capital or material) abroad. Those who did manage operations abroad fared better when able to turn their collaborations eastward, toward China, Russia, and India, countries whose economic prowess was so great that their companies could obtain exemptions, pay fines, or simply defy sanctions (Early).

Revolution, militarism, and neoliberalism comprise the backdrop for understanding current conditions in which Iran becomes more and more isolated and sanctioned. These macro processes come together and shape lives, both biological and social, including those of individuals and their sense of self, their relationships with others and with the natural and built environment, as well as their aspirations, ideals, and ethics. I seek to better understand how they cope with the persistence of sanctions, not to mention the threat of war. I consider my interlocutors' perceptions of the effects of sanctions. I do not seek to determine either the causality or verifiability of their comments, but rather to take the whole of those comments as data about their perceptions of their experiences of sanctions. In this way, I draw from their storytelling and allow them to play the key roles in imagining their community (Benjamin).

SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE ON U.S. AND LINKING THE NUCLEAR ISSUE TO PEOPLES' LIVELIHOODS

The stories in this section convey my interlocutors' shifting perspectives on the U.S., its regional strategies, international dominance, and transformation from a power that stood for justice, human rights, and democracy to one that supports injustice, global apartheid, and militarism (Besteman 2020). Their views also convey the complexity and contradictions embedded in both sanctions regimes and their expressed intentions. These perceptions were no doubt shaped in part by their attention to international politics through satellite networks and social media platforms. They were also partly influenced by Iran's own state-run media and programming. For instance, one immensely popular series, *Gando*, dubbed the Iranian *Homeland*, played to millions in Iran and abroad in 2019 and remains available for streaming. Its 30 episodes follow the actions of an elite undercover counter-espionage group within Iran's intelligence

services. The protagonists piece together the clandestine operations of a number of West-facing Iranians, an Iranian-American, and a few Europeans, whose seeming anodyne parties and business affairs reveal a much deeper plot to overthrow the government. In one poignant scene, the main protagonist explains U.S. policies to a colleague with the depth and detail of a public service announcement:

Our rise is not in the interest of any country in the world, from the U.S. and the European countries to our neighbors right here around us. America's aim is the overthrow of the government. And its largest lever is what? Sanctions. Since the thing that they are after is [to provoke] a movement [among] the hungry. In the U.S., more than anyone else, it's Senator Tom Cotton and, who was the other one, ah, Michael DeAndrea, from the CIA,

who have hung their hopes on this approach. Their formula is simple: introducing economic pressure to the people until little by little economic dissatisfaction gives way to civil disobedience, until the people themselves take action to change the government.

So the nuclear issue is an excuse?

In fact, by no means. The U.S. has another objective as well. And what is that? Linking the nuclear issue with people's livelihoods. They call it the nuclear-livelihoods theory. What does it mean? It means they incite protest movements in this way to inspire the belief that the sanctions and economic difficulties are in reality because of our quest for nuclear capabilities.

So, Iran must respond, not only to the entire world for its nuclear objectives, but it also must persuade its own people that the country is in extreme need of nuclear energy. This way, the difficulties of our government will increase.

Wow. I didn't know the extent of this.

Our difficulty is that if the government for any reason or in any way stops short on the nuclear issue, they will immediately tie another capability with that of people's livelihoods and without any hesitation they will raise

the scenario of "missiles and livelihoods". Do you understand?" (*Gando*, episode 9)

Friends who watched *Gando* expressed to me their cynicism at the state-run television for producing such an on-the-nose depiction but, at the same time, agreed with its message. One used the above scene to dig into Iran's geopolitical influence: "Well, it's true. The U.S. and other Western powers do not want to see Iran become too powerful in the region". However, what struck me in the conversations was the increased distrust of my less political, more West-facing interlocutors.

This shift in Iranian perceptions of the U.S. is significant given the pre-revolutionary (and to an extent continuing) admiration of the U.S. by ordinary Iranians. In 2018, for the first time in some 20 years of conducting research in Iran, I heard Iranians from many walks of life express suspicion and even disdain for the U.S. with surprising unity: "I agree with Khamenei on the U.S. That's the *only* thing I agree with him on", said one friend, sitting at home with her husband by her side. "What's that?", I asked, seeking clarification. "He says the U.S. cannot be trusted".

This line of discussion took me by surprise, not only because of the contempt this couple had previously expressed toward their own government, but because in the decade that I had known them, their pro-American, working-class family in-

cessantly watched American crime series, such as NCIS, Spaghetti Westerns, and any films with actors Vin Diesel and Bruce Willis. The couple's three sons, between the ages of 20 and 25, envied the freedoms Americans had to the point of getting tattoos of the American Eagle and a marijuana leaf.

These feelings among my interlocutors grew more entrenched in the face of the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA and its maximum pressure campaign. In the summer of 2019, another interlocutor, Gita, whom I had come to know from my very first trip to Iran in 1999, angrily quipped, "I hate Trump", while the satellite news service reported on the latest round of unilateral U.S. sanctions.

- "Why?" I asked.
- "He's torturing and killing 80 million people for his own political gain".
- "What political gains?"
- "To win elections at the expense of 80 million people. This is a person who lacks humanity. I hope he loses because he lacks even the smallest grain of decency".

I parroted some of the ostensible concerns of the U.S. Department of State and Iranian exiles with whom it confers: "But what about human rights and Iranians outside the country who point out the abuses?"

"That should be left to us", she respond-

ed. "We in Iran must and will fight. Besides, sanctions only make the government here stronger, and more people have to rely on the government for handouts, charity, subsidies, and loans. And don't think for a second that they [government officials] or their families are suffering or want for anything".

Her sentiment also surprised me because of her lifelong enmity for the religious leadership of her country and a sustained but never realized desire to immigrate to the U.S. ("only America, not Canada, Australia, or England", she used to say). Now she clarified her feelings: "America is good for Americans. But they don't care about us ordinary Iranians". Her response suggested to me that U.S. overtures did not pass muster with Iranians living in Iran, in part due to sanctions.

A response from yet another interlocutor also caught my attention. This was a government insider who has worked for years with hardline administrations and has access to high-level security information, but who privately and personally believes in a system that is both free of religion and strong on civil liberties. He and his family have travelled abroad on annual vacations to Turkey, Russia, and hoped to venture to Europe and America. When I went to their posh residence in *Shemiran* (Northern Tehran), he greeted me wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the U.S. flag, a frivolity that, if known by his employers, could cost him his job. He had supported Donald Trump's

candidacy for president in 2016. Referencing the candidate's positions on Muslims and the JCPOA, I had asked why. He explained: "He will do things differently, and maybe a positive change will come here, as well". In the summer of 2019, when I revisited the conversation, my friend said, "I was wrong" and spoke of sanctions, the economic devastation, and Iran's inability to sell its oil, but then emphasized what had primarily changed his view:

The sanctions are really hurting ordinary people, not people of means. Business owners can't sell their products, can't get goods from abroad. People can't get medication, can't travel. They (U.S.) want to ruin us, so that we are not a regional power – for the interests of Israel. [But sanctions] are only strengthening the hand of the government.

Many of my interlocutors lamented the degradation of their economic situation over the past couple of years. Far from seeing the improvements they had expected after the nuclear deal, they complained of being duped by the U.S., that it did not care about the Iranian people, and that the Supreme Leader was correct in stating that the U.S. was untrustworthy.

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ECONOMIC PRECARITY: FROM WORKING CLASS TO WORKING POOR

Iranians I encountered also spoke of their precarious economic situations. They did not reduce their criticism to a single source. Rather, they lamented the many variables that placed so many in a veritable chokehold: sanctions, economic mismanagement, corruption, and support their government gave allies in regional conflicts. To the extent that they saw this as a result of U.S. sanctions was when they recounted how they were caught in protracted economic insecurity driven by a low-intensity conflict between the U.S. and Iran. For instance, Maheen, who gave private English-language lessons in her home, said, “we, ordinary Iranians, are trapped between the disputing governments, but don’t think for a second they suffer. It’s the ordinary people who suffer”. Her students could no longer afford the luxury of private tutoring, and she had lost them all.

These experiences spoke to the micro-dynamics of low intensity civil conflict, showing how the working and middle classes are being obliterated economically and what is happening to broader swaths of society as a result. At the same time, I also observed new relationalities that emerge when social life is lived amid uncertainty, loss, and a siege mentality that sanctions carry with them. These sentiments overlap with the noted effects of economic austerity: deindustrialization, dismantling of social structures, and social disjuncture and alienation (Brown; Han; and Walley). Just as Varoufakis has noted that austerity is war against the working class, so, too, are sanctions a means of war against a country’s working people.

Maheen was hardly ignorant of these effects, as she analyzed the situation in which she and many others found themselves:

We went from working class to working poor. We live in a lower [less affluent] part of town, but even here people can't afford to stay. People are moving out to go even further south. A year ago [2018], property here was 2.7 million *toman* for one square meter.⁴ Now it's 8 [million per square meter]!⁵ You see, those who have land, can live on rents, but rents are sky high, and now it is also impossible to purchase anything.

Maheen went on to describe working people's diminishing purchasing power. "Last year, beef cost around 30 to 40 *toman* per kilo, now it's 120 *toman*. We can't afford to eat beef anymore. A *Pride* (domestically made car) cost twelve million last year [2018]; now it's 52; the price has more than quadrupled."

I interjected an obvious if naïve question: "How do working people survive?" "Everyone has their hands in each other's pockets", she responded. While a bit glib, the answer also invoked the mutual aid responses of communities in the throes of humanitarian disasters. That Iran had not at that time been in the throes of such disaster, would explain her insouciance. However, as our conversation continued, she reflected further on how sanctions were affecting working people – the now "working poor", as she put it. Referring to her recently married son and daughter-in-law, she said, "the kids have to come up with more money in a matter of months

or they will lose their apartment." They had moved into the space only a year earlier. "Their landlord just raised *rahn* (the security deposit usually amounting to one third of the property's value and supplemented by monthly rents) by 40 percent! These people are traffickers in sanctions; they do business off of sanctions – and people's suffering".

My interlocutors bemoaned not only "the rich getting richer", but also that to the extent they provided economic opportunities and other possibilities to working people, those were diminishing, as well. Another spoke of her neighbor, with a job in home healthcare. "We are from the poor part of town, but Nina took care of a woman in the wealthy part of Tehran. This was good for her because of her asthma. The air quality is better over there". She lived there in a small room and sent her earnings to her parents, about \$200.⁶ But recently, "the family that employed her asked that she leave so that one of their own family members, who had been laid-off, could take her place.

—"So what happened to Nina and her asthma?"

—"Nothing. She moved back home and suffers with her health, like a lot of people. She hopes this crisis will end someday and that she will be placed with another family".

Another interlocutor gave the perspective of a well-to-do Iranian living in the moun-

tainous northern parts of the city, the better air quality matched with a very high cost of living. But even she was forced to become attentive to the economic situation. “Do you know how much a pair of shoes cost [in 1978, just before the revolution]? 75 *toman*; now the cheapest pair is 40,000 *toman*”. For a more recent comparison, she added, “take tomatoes, for instance. Today a kilo costs 18,000 *toman*; a year ago, it was 5,000–6,000! Beef is now 100–200 *toman* per kilo”. She then addressed the uncertainty brought on by the unpredictable inflation rate:

It’s economic anarchy. There is no *en-sejam* (consistency). Prices suddenly shot up abnormally. Chicken, fish, onion, potatoes ... these items are all produced in Iran. Purchasing power has gone down by 50 percent [from 2018 to 2019]. Sure, there has been poor decision making [by the government], but this is all very abnormal. The sanctions, alongside the incompetence and corruption, it must be said, are adding to people’s misery.

The unstated goal of maximum pressure is to push the state to the point where the measures render society ungovernable (Dewachi). My interlocutors’ experiences of “misery” and “anarchy” point to a society teetered toward ungovernability.

A friend who worked for 30 years in government and sought to buy a car with a government subsidized loan noted: “I turned

my back, and the price of a car doubled in three weeks, no, two days! I got the loan, but by then it was insufficient to buy the car. The prices of medication”, she continued, “have more than doubled. When my mother was alive, we could barely afford it, now ...”

—“What do people do?”

—“Nothing. They drop dead.”

Finally, Mehdi, a filmmaker, summarized:

The middle class is disappearing; [there’s] no margin for anything special, just the basic food items to survive; there’s no cinema, restaurants, no doctor, dentist, psychologist. In the last two to three years, people have lost so much, all their savings and investments, and yet they say the sanctions are not directed at the people.

ECONOMIC PIVOT: FROM REVOLUTIONARY ECONOMY TO ENDURANCE ECONOMY

Several years before the Trump administration announced its maximum pressure campaign, Iran's leaders had attempted to motivate citizens to shift their economic agenda from one that had worked to achieve the goals set forth by the 1979 revolution to that of a resistance economy (*ekhtesad-e moqhavematy*), which sought to keep liquidity from leaving the country and withstand economic hardships imposed from abroad.⁷ In 2019, an interlocutor, a business manager at her family's firm, explained what she saw as another shift, that "the leaders seek to establish an economy of endurance (*ekhtesad-e esteghamaty*), one that can withstand (not simply resist) economic hardships dispensed, ostensibly, by Iran's enemies". The aim, she continued, "is to try to prevent money from leaving the country and to get the people to produce; we use our efforts to produce domestically".

Prices of raw materials increased suddenly and dramatically. Companies had to deal, she noted, with the increased costs of "raw materials, which are often foreign, and other rising costs: salaries, inventory, administration, machinery, and other production expenditures".

While others have considered the economic dimensions of this shift, I focus on what such a state of affairs means for industrious young business leaders whom I encountered, so as to better understand what such conditions meant for the managerial classes more broadly. The effects of the pressures they encountered may also compare with other cases in which people have been abandoned by capital, even in the context of deindustrialization of urban areas in the U.S. (Walley). The maximum pressure campaign suggests its own deindustrializing effects. As one young entre-

preneur, Kamran, noted, Iranian business leaders and the government seek to build capacity for resilience in the face of severe external pressures (Heydeman and Leenders). I observed how my interlocutors' firms have been able to reorient production to replace imports and exports.

Kamran had thoughts on these new ways of operating. He lives in Kerman, where he owns a store that sells women's headscarves and shawls. He was in Tehran to pick up a delivery of headscarves when I met him in the summer of 2019. "Nine months ago (January 2019), 70 percent of my headscarves came from China, and 30 percent were a mix, manufactured in Turkey and Thailand", he said. "Because of sanctions, today 70 percent of my scarves are made in Iran".

Kamran told me that Iran has the resources to make headscarves but could import them cheaper from China. "Each season, I would order headscarves from China. After sanctions, however, Chinese imports became more expensive and with the uncertainty of sanctions, delivery was also a concern. Now I make my orders in Iran. Higher prices and uncertainty have also inspired Iran's textile industry to get back to work". Kamran explained how he managed to keep his business afloat:

This past year I sold less units overall but at higher prices to a wealthier clientele. A headscarf is almost twice as expensive now as a year ago (2018),

whether it is exported or imported. Of course, depending on the material and quality, individual prices vary, as well, between 78,000, 88,000 and 108,000 *toman* ... a silk shawl can go from between 150,000 and 400,000 *toman*. I buy in bulk. For instance, last year the headscarves I bought for 40,000 per unit wholesale sold for 52,000 retail. This year a 60,000 wholesale investment netted 78,000 retail. Wholesale prices range from between 60,000 to 100,000 *toman*. Some in the bazaar had to cut their profit margins to pay the increasing costs of running their store and at the same time maintain affordability in accordance with their customers' purchasing power, but I didn't have to because I own my store outright.

Thus, he didn't have extra overhead costs of running the store. He continued, "My customers initially decreased by about 25 percent, but my unit prices went up. Before I was selling about 1,000 headscarves per month. Now I sell about 700-800."

Kamran added that he had met a young man on the train to Tehran from Tabriz who worked on machines that print designs on fabric. "His father was *Sepah*."⁸ With this comment, Kamran conveyed that such light industries, either emerging or being retooled, were in the hands of the powerful Revolutionary Guard Corps. Very subtly, he suggested not only that the sanctions were providing business opportunities, but

also who was being offered those opportunities.

He continued to explain the changing nature of retail business: “People used to buy [foreign] brands, but because pricing was based on the dollar (exchange rate), they are now too expensive, so more people buy locally-manufactured items. Kerman is not a center of fashion, so the wealthy there used to shop in Dubai, Kish, or Turkey ... [But now] Iranians are the only tourists inside the country. They travel within Iran and spend the money inside the country”.

Kamran also conveyed how the shift in purchasing power redirected some of the money that was earlier leaving the country:

Iranian clothing brands have also taken the place of the foreign ones. For instance, Iranian brands, like *Dorsa*, have become the luxury brand, and other brands, like *BodySpinner* (formerly *Tanris*) and *Saaleean*, are becoming more popular. Foreign brands like Nike have become super lux-brands – out of reach for almost everyone except the 1 percent. Local brands are spreading throughout the country. Ten years ago, *Saaleean*, was only in Mashhad, but now the name is known by everyone throughout Iran.

Amir, publisher of a monthly journal, summarized the state of industry and manufacturing amid economic stagnation and

uncertainty. “These are multi-layered issues. Many small businesses have closed, [and also] magazines, because paper, plastic – raw materials – are unavailable. Industries and manufacturers cannot provide these, so businesses fold once their supply diminishes”. He then added an important point about the depth of damage from sanctions:

This is a sensitive time in the development of the country; we are in an age of growth. They [sanctions] block the country’s growth and development, its pursuits – scientific, business, law, intellectual, and arts. Then there are power dynamics between people as well – students/young/educated-class versus older/semi-professionals. The challenges that present themselves also involve the human ability to shift values and reprioritize.

Ingenuity and hard work do not necessarily yield better quality of life for working people, especially in terms of their psyches. The endless uncertainty and enduring stressors taint the innovative strides they otherwise make, leaving affective stains on their nerves and outlooks for the future.

ENDURING LIVES: THE SLOW VIOLENCE OF SANCTIONS

“Have you noticed how sad and disheveled people look?”, my friend, Shiva, asked during my first week in Tehran in the summer of 2019. I had not, I told her. “Don’t you see the stress and strain on their faces? They are holding in so much tension and hardship, like the patient stone”. This referred to a Persian folk tale in which a stone absorbs the sorrows of those who confide in it, allowing others to unburden themselves. As it reaches its limit of taking on the troubles of others, the stone explodes. For some, this would be the day of the Apocalypse. Shiva continued: “There is so little that brings us joy these days”. The pressures have become so persist and ubiquitous that they spill into every surface and pore of life, such that no experience exists without their presence.

Anthropologist Ilana Feldman explored the experience of Palestinians as subjects of protracted humanitarian relief over some 70 years. For almost the same period of time, Iranians have been subject to sanctions, embargoes, and other measures of

economic isolation. Drawing from the idea of enduring – the patient stone – I consider the protracted nature of sanctions and the slow violence they entail. Iranians experience these pressures as targets, not of relief, but of maximum pressure. I ponder how Iranians caught up in the sanctioning cross-hairs of the U.S. endure and what the message of sanctions and international isolation communicates to them about their humanity.

As Abtin, a stage and film actor, said, “it’s a *faje’e* (calamity)”; another, Kayvon, a journalist and publisher, noted: “It’s a *dard-e moshtarak* (collective pain)”. Taken together, these conditions speak to the maximalist nature of the sanctions: so ruinous as to push the people to rise up against their government and to the collective nature of the pressures. Many struggled with their personal economic conditions, and, even as they recounted their problems, few would overtly tell me about their personal finances. They often spoke obliquely about such things as rapidly increasing prices,

but I saw the difference on dinner tables. Stews had less meat; rarely did I eat beef on the visit in 2019. Even in the more affluent homes in which the more traditional beef-heavy dishes were served, portions were smaller. In other homes, chicken, too, had become a luxury. Pasta and egg dishes seemed to replace the traditional meat-laden stews.

One way my friends did communicate the difficulties was through transference. They projected their feelings toward the pressures of sanctions on to others. For instance, Sara, who worked in a small private company, offered an example of how inflation stresses have affected even modest middle and working class joys:

Consider something many people have for their personal pleasure, parrots. Although not a luxury item, they enhance the quality of life, and many people keep them. Five years ago [2014], bird feed cost 1,200 *toman*; three years ago, it was 3,000–4,000 *toman*; last year [2018], it was 19,000; now [2019] for a 900 gram bag, it's between 23,000 and 25,000! So you see, even such small joys as feeding their pets have become heavy burdens.

Sara did not have any pets but did have two school-age children. In late summer 2019, she was struggling to come up with money to buy supplies for the start of the school year. Although she complained about the rising costs of such supplies and

related fees, Sara did not associate them with sanctions. However, she readily purchased backpacks and other school supplies that were made in Iran rather than imported, as she had in the past.

Some had no difficulty conveying their feelings on the economic pressures. The friends in a less affluent part of town with three grown sons grew angry at the ideas promoted by Iran's exile community and U.S. pundits and politicians who exhorted them to pour into the streets in protest, and risk their lives: "For what? So they can set up a puppet government here?" These conversations included multiple references to U.S. adventures in Iraq: "They don't care about us. Look what they did to the Iraqi people. No way!" And, referring to Iranian exiles abroad: "They can send their own sons and daughters to risk their lives".

Besides reflecting on their worsening economic condition, my interlocutors spoke of broader effects on their living conditions and stresses brought on by foreclosed opportunities and diminished prospects. My journalist friend added, "people don't work, don't marry. There's a sense of isolation, but that is not new. Now we feel as though time has stopped". The life cycle was slowing, with each stage extended and belabored without the expectant gains necessary to move forward. "Do you know how many engineers are driving taxis?", the friend asked.

Those who feel the brunt of sanctions sense that they, not the government, are pariahs. Donya, a 28-year old would-be toxicology PhD student, said, “I wanted to go abroad”. She was recounting the difficulties of continuing her studies in Iran, since her specialization required her to seek apprenticeships abroad, as scientists all over the world do. “But”, she said, “no one wants us”. After the JCPOA, Donya had received visas to give papers in France and the Czech Republic and was able to publish her conference proceedings as single-authored articles. However, in the summer of 2019, despite dozens of inquiries to PhD programs in Europe and Canada, Donya found no professors willing to sponsor her studies. Whatever individual reasons for her lack of acceptance, and despite conversations with scientists to the contrary, Donya could not separate her inability to secure a spot in a PhD program abroad from her nationality and her country’s status as international pariah.

By the summer of 2020, however, all was not lost for Donya. She had taken a position in a lab, started an online “popup” boutique on Instagram, and continued to research and write scientific papers. Donya said that she “hoped that the tide would change with the election” – not the parliamentary and presidential contests in Iran in 2021, but rather those in the U.S. in 2020.

The life cycle was slowing, with each stage extended and belabored without the expectant gains necessary to move forward.

CONCLUSION

Within the neoliberal political economy, sanctions are tools that facilitate illegality. Powerful players impose them to bring rogue states to heel, by compliance or isolation. There is a bigger story here about our social and political present. Iranians' perceptions of abandonment, isolation, and dispossession are driven by their experiences of sanctions, but they are also feeling the consequences of neoliberalism amplified. The result is not one-dimensional, but rather an almost cartoonish exaggeration through the ceaseless accumulation of multiple policies, practices, and processes such that individuals cannot distinguish or discern between their effects: COVID-19, economic mismanagement, corruption, support for foreign conflicts, and sanctions. The accumulation of factors lends the sanctions regime its own plausible deniability.

Comprehensive sanction regimes breed more "strong" or authoritarian states in which people are made to appeal to the state's benevolence, thus making many more – not less – dependent on the state. This is particularly so in Iran with its vast and overlapping networks of state-run charities and its welfare apparatus (Harris). The state's benevolence is hardly benign or devoid of politics. Indeed, such power permits it to refuse to help suffering groups, while redirecting limited funds to

its own supporters or to use the limited resources to extract obedience and loyalty. Left to appeal to or accept state support, citizens live under a special kind of siege mentality, one brought on by sanctions but exacerbated by their reliance on the state. The population's indebtedness strengthens state institutions and reverberates in the sentiments of Iranians who have lost faith in the U.S. and the international community.

These sentiments are exemplified in the conversation I had in the fall of 2020 with a member of the government, who said, "people are experiencing very severe economic difficulties because of the situation they are in, which is specific to Iran, due to the conditions caused by the sanctions, but they prefer to endure this hundreds of times over rather than surrender to someone like Trump, of course".

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ENDNOTES

1. To preserve the anonymity of my interlocutors, throughout this article, I have used pseudonyms.
2. For Mbembe, necropolitics – governing through death or where people are kept alive but in a state of injury – are instituted through policies largely driven by racism and political interests that seek an organized destruction of others (bad actors or competitors), in part by sacrificing their economy. This requires a cheapening of life and a habituation of loss (p. 38). Slow violence occurs through gradual accrual of out-of-sight policies and acts, which are rarely seen, let alone considered to be violent (Nixon).
3. For a discussion of these alliances in Latin America, see Narges Bajoghli's contribution in this collection.
4. A *toman* is a superunit of the Iranian rial. One *toman* is equivalent to ten rials. While the rial is the official currency, Iranians use the term *toman* in daily life.
5. Given the volatility of Iran's currency, I have not calculated equivalent U.S. dollar values. I retain amounts quoted by my interlocutors in rials in order to demonstrate the increasing costs within Iran, based on my interlocutors' experiences, rather than seeking to measure costs for similar goods or services in the U.S.
6. The amount was described in U.S. currency.
7. In June 2012, Ayatollah Khomeini gave a speech on the pivot to a resistance economy. In March 2014, he provided a ten-point plan outlining that resistance economy, which included incentives for domestic production, reducing reliance on oil resources, securing basic goods, and combatting corruption.
8. The *Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Irani* (Revolutionary Guards Corps) is a branch of Iran's armed forces that was founded after the 1979 revolution to protect the political system of the Islamic Republic. In recent years it has come to control broad sections of the economy.