One of the oddest consequences of U.S. sanctions toward Iran is how it has compelled ordinary Iranians, particularly pro-democracy elements, to help strengthen the Islamic Republic’s claim to rule. The sanctions have has given the autocrats in Tehran undue legitimacy by providing them a nationalistic cause. While much of Iran’s national consciousness evolves around a sentiment of nostalgia over the loss of territories dating back to the Iranian defeat in the Russo-Persian war, anxiety over an intensity of relations between U.S. and Iran continues to run high in a country known for its staunch nationalism.

Current sanctions have boosted patriotic sentiments against Washington due to a perception that the ultimate aim is the disintegration of the territorial integrity of the Iranian nation.

Partly as a direct consequence of the recent rise of confrontation rhetoric expressed by certain U.S. officials (for instance, Senator Clinton’s obliterating Iran comments), many former reformist activists, who were Islamic Republic’s most powerful opponents under Khatami (1997-2005), have toned down their critique of the regime. Although opposition continues to be a major feature of the post-Khatami period, especially visible in the women’s movement, the Iranian civil society has experienced a change of attitude and has become more defensive in mode.

Since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, when the fear of a possible U.S. attack began to preoccupy the minds of many Iranians, rise in nationalism has opened a new wave of support for the state as a way to avert U.S. intervention.

Field research and informal interviews conducted in several major Iranian cities reveal how the overall Iranian perception toward the U.S. sanctions run counter to U.S. policy objectives.

There is a strong shared narrative that describes the sanctions as a means for the U.S. to undermine the Iranian nation, as opposed to the state. “It is obvious now that Iran is under foreign (ajnabi) attack. The sanctions are a soft type of war. I oppose the regime, but I will never allow anyone to bully our country, even if they [Islamic Republic] are still in power,” a working class man of age 31 explained.

The above statement articulates the type of nationalistic perceptions that many Iranians share in regards to the sanctions. That is, the U.S. designed sanctions are not meant to hurt the Iranian government but to destabilize the Iranian nation; they are intended to weaken Iran and undermine its right to protect itself against foreign intrusion.

The notion of “invasion” (hamleh) signifies a common theme among most of the people interviewed. Particularly in major cities like Isfahan and Tehran, nearly half of the interviewed
subjects recalled the 1953 U.S.-led coup of Mossadeq’s regime, representing a daunting reminder of America’s past policy of intervention in Iran’s domestic affairs.

In the province of Khuzistan, U.S. support for Saddam’s regime during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) played a more central role. Those who were interviewed expressed anger against the sanctions and described them as an extension of the eight year war. “We have to be united. Arabs and Ajams (i.e. Persians and Azari Turks) must back the military and the government in case of a U.S. invasion. The sanctions are just a prelude to an invasion,” an Arab-Iranian resident of Bushehr explained.

This statement is important since it is articulated by an Arab-Iranian whose nationalist reaction as a non-Persian can be detected in the call for national unity against a perceived foreign enemy.

But what is most interesting to note here is the perception of an inevitable “invasion” that is associated with the sanctions. The one immediate feature of the logic of such narratives is the shared belief in national unity in terms of the formation of a union between society and state against a perceived threat that the sanctions best identify as a means to undermine the nation.

What is central to the above examples is that it proves the point that the sanctions are by no means producing incentives for ordinary Iranians to turn against the regime. The policy of sanctions has failed not only to disengage the population from the regime, especially those who are not politically active, but in fact identify them with the state.

In this sense, particularly ineffective has been the tendency to view sanctions as a way to isolate the regime and contribute to its demise by forcing people to turn against the state’s ineffective policies that deprive the country of prosperity and stability. But nothing would galvanize a population to unite with the state more than a perceived or a real threat of an external attack.

Most disturbingly, U.S. sanctions have enabled the Iranian government to justify itself as a protector of a people who share a common national identity.

Ironically, the Islamic Republic is benefiting from the policy of isolationism by making itself look like a heroic protector of the Iranian nation, hence legitimizing its authority in the process.

Meanwhile, as the fear of confrontation between Iran and U.S. continues to rise, Iranian hard-liners are capitalizing on the hostilities by promoting the notion absolute obedience to the state is required by the masses in order to prevent any potential invasion. The sanctions are proving to be one of the best means for the regime to consolidate power.

The flaws of the sanctions can only be overcome through a radical policy change. A new approach based on engagement must aim not only to directly negotiate with Iran, but direct outreach to ordinary Iranians is also needed. The objective of a new policy should be to shift the balance of power between the state and society in ways that the later would be strengthened through economic and political incentives, which reduced tensions between the U.S. and Iran would provide by putting Iran’s civic society in close contact with the international community.

To press forward with the sanctions, however, is to carry on with a failed policy that continues to legitimize a state that has shrewdly used the sanctions, or any form of U.S. threat, to bolster its authority among ordinary Iranians. By isolating Iran through sanctions, Washington inadvertently helps undermine the country’s civil society, which at this moment is intoxicated with nationalist sentiments as a reaction to a perceived U.S. threat.

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