

# WALKING BACK IRAN SANCTIONS WITH RE- ENGAGEMENT

MEGHAN WARREN

The Obama administration's claim that sanctions on Iran are working is belied by a problematic truth: Sanctions are often ineffective as a tool of statecraft. Instead, the U.S. should embrace a new strategy of principled re-engagement with Iran that revisits diplomacy and minimizes harm to regular Iranians. Such a strategy is the best way to alleviate the long-term threat posed by the Iranian regime.

*Read this briefing online at <http://wpr.vu/9tY7Y>*

# Walking Back Iran Sanctions With Re-Engagement

By Meghan Warren

06 Mar 2012



To read more like this, [subscribe to worldpoliticsreview.com](http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com), or [request a free trial for your organization](#).

The Obama administration's claim that sanctions on Iran are working is belied by a problematic truth: Sanctions are a short-sighted and often ineffective tool of statecraft. In the case of Iran, they have had a strongly negative impact on the average Iranian, thereby diminishing the United States' moral standing in the world and undermining the goal of reducing the security threat posed by Iran. Recognizing this, the U.S. should embrace a new strategy of principled re-engagement with Iran that revisits diplomacy and minimizes harm to regular Iranians. Such a strategy is the best way to alleviate the long-term threat posed by the Iranian regime.

Sanctions, by definition, aim to cause economic pain. Advocates of sanctions argue that they target only the elite, but the reality is they are more like a chainsaw than a scalpel. Consider the sanctions levied against Iraq's leadership in the 1990s. U.N. reports indicate that, despite focusing on Iraqi leaders, sanctions caused the nation to slide from 54th to 127th worldwide in human development rankings. Life expectancy dropped from 65 years to 58. Iraq could not import the goods necessary for basic survival, allowing disease, starvation and poverty to run rampant.

Recent reports indicate that Iran may be headed in a similar direction. Iran's government bears most of the blame for its economic woes, but sanctions have worsened the situation. The Iranian riyal [has declined sharply in value](#), while oil production has decreased. Meanwhile, incomes have plummeted, and basic goods are growing scarce. Food prices are increasing, and Iranians, fearing a food shortage, have taken to stockpiling staple items. The cost of medical care is rising, creating obstacles to treatment. Up to 1,200 Iranian cancer patients go without radiological treatments each year, as hospitals are unable to obtain the technology needed to operate the necessary equipment.

No matter how narrowly tailored they are, sanctions primarily affect the powerless and poor, as the privileged and wealthy have the resources to find their way around any resulting restrictions. And with memories of the crackdown on the 2009 Green Revolution still fresh, the Iranian public is hesitant to exert pressure against their government to prevent further sanctions. Instead, Iranian leaders will continue to use the sting of economic sanctions to redirect domestic discord outward and distract its citizens from the government's own failures. Additionally, Iranian citizens generally support Iran's right to pursue a peaceful domestic nuclear program and don't believe it should be abandoned. There is no evidence suggesting that sanctions will reverse this longstanding trend in public opinion.

By increasing economic pain on the poor and middle class, the United States is alienating the very people it hopes will exert pressure on the Iranian government in order to achieve long-term political change. Moreover, sanctions harm the United States' regional standing. To be fair, the United States will always face criticism in the Middle East, but lifting sanctions and partially alleviating the economic suffering of the Iranian people would demonstrate a commitment to human rights and undermine the credibility of critics.

The Obama administration's relentless [strategy of tightening sanctions](#) and refusing to take military action off the table is ineffective. The only carrot the United States has offered the Iranians is the opportunity to talk, which isn't much of a carrot at all -- especially when the precondition

to talking is that Iran give up its enrichment capability. Sanctions and war can remain the sticks in this equation, but the United States must offer better incentives for cooperation and give those initiatives a chance to work before turning to aggressive measures.

The United States should pursue a new strategy of principled re-engagement that offers Iran a way to back down without humiliation, and minimizes the damage inflicted on civilians. The United States should also drop the perennially counterproductive policy of demanding concessions before anyone reaches the negotiating table. Instead, the United States should lift sanctions or offer aid in exchange for confidence-building measures. From there, the United States has several avenues it could pursue to address concerns about Iran's uranium enrichment capability. It could revisit and fine-tune the fuel-swap deal Turkey and Brazil **brokered with Iran in 2010**, which was rejected by U.S. officials at the time as "too little, too late." However, since uranium enrichment is not forbidden under the NPT, the United States must rethink its bottom line and consider a deal that allows Iran to maintain its enrichment capability. Under this approach, Iran would be required to renew its Additional Protocol agreement with the IAEA; place all its nuclear facilities under comprehensive safeguards; agree to convert as many facilities as technically feasible from highly enriched uranium to low-enriched uranium fuel and materials; and sign and ratify international conventions intended to ensure the security of its nuclear materials, such as the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Materials, as well as the CPPNM's 2005 Amendment.

Of course, the risk remains that Iran will not respond to good-faith efforts to negotiate or will renege on an agreement, in which case the United States should renew sanctions. However, Washington must bear in mind that the end game, should both re-engagement and sanctions fail, likely means regime change and use of military force. This does not guarantee a favorable outcome for the United States. Given the costs associated with such a gambit, the United States would do well to explore all other options first.

Sanctions undermine U.S. moral authority and leadership on the very issues it hopes to resolve with Iran, and they harm the United States' greater strategic interests in the region. With tensions escalating every day, it's worth remembering that the United States hasn't given diplomacy a chance to work. As the more powerful country in this situation, the United States should exhaust all avenues of compromise before it pursues the blunt use of force, whether economic or military. It's not simply a moral argument, though. It's good strategy. □

*Meghan Warren is a research associate at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies.*

*Photo: Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad touring Iran's uranium enrichment facility in Natanz, Iran, 2008 (photo by the Web site of the president of Iran).*