

Destabilizing Iran as a Nation State: Targeted Sanctions as an “Alternative” to War?

By [Ben Schreiner](#)

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Washington’s quest to bring Tehran to its knees continues to accelerate. And in turn, ordinary Iranians increasingly find themselves caught in the crosshairs.

As the *Washington Post* [reports](#) on the latest round of Iran sanctions signed by President Obama last week, “the new policies are closer to a true trade embargo, designed to systematically attack and undercut Iran’s major financial pillars and threaten the country with economic collapse.”

“The new law imposes sanctions against international companies that do business with Iranian firms in the targeted industrial sectors, and also seeks to block Iran from obtaining aluminum, steel, coal and other materials critical for construction and vehicle manufacturing,” the *Post* continues.

The order — to conjure the ghost of Nixon — has clearly been given to [“make the economy scream.”](#)

In fact, as the *New York Times* [reported](#) back in June, the sanctions on Iran “represent one of the boldest uses of oil sanctions as a tool of coercion since the United States cut off oil exports to Japan in 1940.”

Of course, in the case of Japan, the oil embargo led to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and gave the U.S. the pretext it sought to enter the Second World War. And for those fixing to attack Iran today, such a [history is well understood](#). After all, waiting for the “next Pearl Harbor” has long been something of an obsession for U.S. neo-cons.

Sanctions as an Alternative to War?

It is often argued, however, that sanctions — imperfect as they are — offer an alternative to war.

As Zbigniew Brzezinski writes in a recent *Washington Post* [op-ed](#), “a reckless shortcut to war...is not the wisest response to a potentially grave crisis.” Instead, Brzezinski goes on to argue that, “A more prudent and productive course for the United States would be to continue the painful sanctions against Iran.”

But such arguments by sanction enthusiasts obscure the fact that sanctions are indeed an act of war. After all, what else are we to call the deliberate crippling of a nation’s economy? And in any case, if the American economy were made to scream we can be assured there would be American bombs aplenty.

What's more, though, not only are sanctions clearly an act of war, they often serve as a prelude to an escalated confrontation. And one certainly need not venture far beyond Iran to find evidence of Washington's favored sanction today, invade tomorrow strategy.

"Targeted" Sanctions

The second lie so often accompanying the use of sanctions is that they are somehow "targeted." In the case of Iran, the true nature of the supposedly "targeted" sanctions was exposed well before the latest round of escalation.

As a July [letter](#) from the Iranian Hemophilia Society written to the World Health Organization warned, sanctions have "seriously endangered the lives of tens of thousands of patients, particularly children, suffering from special diseases."

Likewise, in an August [report](#) to the United Nation's General Assembly, U.N. chief Ban Ki-moon wrote that, "The sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic of Iran have had significant effects on the general population, including an escalation in inflation, a rise in commodities and energy costs, an increase in the rate of unemployment and a shortage of necessary items, including medicine."

Indeed, as a *New York Times* [piece](#) from early November reported, Iranians "suffering from cancer, hemophilia, thalassemia, kidney problems and other diseases are increasingly told the foreign-made medicines they need are no longer available."

A recent report in the British *Guardian* newspaper, meanwhile, has [noted](#) that "millions of lives are at risk in Iran because western economic sanctions are hitting the importing of medicines and hospital equipment."

But such reports have fallen on deaf ears in sanction-happy Washington. After all, for Washington, ordinary Iranians are legitimate targets.

As U.S. Senator Mark Kirk, a co-sponsor of the latest Iran sanctions bill, once [averred](#), "It's okay to take the food out of the mouths of" innocent Iranians.

Kirk was of course simply trying his best to channel Madeleine Albright, who, when asked in a 1996 appearance on *60 Minutes* whether the half million dead Iraqi children due to sanctions was "worth it," coolly [affirmed](#) that, "I think this is a very hard choice, but the price — we think the price is worth it."

The "Mafia Principle"

Such examples of the callus thinking of the Washington elite offer clear evidence of what Noam Chomsky deems the ["Mafia principle"](#) of U.S. foreign policy at work.

"The Godfather does not tolerate 'successful defiance'," Chomsky explains. "It is too dangerous. It must therefore be stamped out so that others understand that disobedience is not an option."

The Islamic Republic, of course, is well acquainted with the "Mafia principle," having fallen under U.S. sanctions since its very inception. Tehran's original sin being nothing less than the toppling of the favored American puppet, the Shah.

Yet as Iran's power in the Middle East has continued to grow, the ire of the Godfather has only mounted. And the Don's indignation has found no more reliable outlet than the ratcheting up of punitive economic sanctions — ordinary Iranians be damned.

Such is the punishment for the crime of defiance — the crime of national independence. As Americans love to say, freedom isn't free. Especially, we might add, for non-Americans.

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