

The Geneva Agreement with Iran: A Result of the Sanctions Policy?

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After intense negotiations between Iran and the great powers (chiefly among them the United States), 24 November 2013 saw a historic breakthrough: In a six-month [interim agreement](#) Tehran committed itself to a substantial freezing of its nuclear program in return for “[modest relief](#)” (U.S. President Barack Obama) in sanctions. The agreement shall be a first step towards achieving a comprehensive solution, with which the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear program shall be ensured while all sanctions against the country would be lifted.

Now, there has been much speculation over the degree in which the decade-long transatlantic Iran strategy of coercive diplomacy was responsible for reaching this diplomatic victory. Was it the permanent threats of war or the increasingly crippling sanctions which in the eyes of many Western observers led Iran to “give in”?

Arguably, it rather was a shift away from that policy of threats and pressure, and towards serious diplomacy aiming at a reconciliation of interests (especially during the month of November), which rendered the deal possible. But yes, without any doubt the sanctions did have an impact: They severely deepened Iran’s economic malaise, considerably harmed a variety of social groups, while part of the power élite quite comfortably adjusted to the sanctions. [Consequently](#), the power gap separating the state and (civil) society was even boosted.

Yet, the immense damage that sanctions have done to society does not bear much relevance for policy-makers. However, what has gone largely unnoticed to supporters of the sanctions policy is the Realpolitik fact that contrary to their stated goal the escalation of sanctions was accompanied by the one of Iran’s nuclear program: When Obama entered the White House, they were not even 1000 centrifuges spinning in Iran; today it is almost 19,000. The reason for that is that the West views sanctions through the cost-benefit lens, according to which it can only be a matter of time until the sanctioned party will give in. In contrast, Tehran sees sanctions as an illegitimate form of coercion, which ought to be resisted, for the alternative would be nothing less than capitulation. Nonetheless, many commentators sardonically insist on praising the sanctions’ alleged effectiveness for aiding diplomacy. This not only is a sign of analytical short-sightedness, but also constitutes the not-so-covert attempt to shed a positive light on the coercive diplomacy that was pursued so far.

In reality, Iran’s willingness to offer concessions is rooted within a wider context. Firstly, Iran

already demonstrated its readiness to compromise during the last [three years](#), which the Obama administration did not dare to accept due to domestic political issues, i.e. re-election. Secondly, and this is likely to have been crucial for achieving the agreement in Geneva, Iran's current foreign policy is primarily not a result of the pressure through sanctions, but is embedded into a specific foreign-policy school of thought which is characterized by realism and a policy of détente. Notably, with Hassan Rohani's election the 'defensive realist' school of thought reasserted power, which had been already leading during Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Khatami's administrations. Their prime objective is a policy of détente and rapprochement especially towards the West, but also neighboring Arab states, chief among them Iran's geopolitical adversary, Saudi Arabia.

In contrast to the 'offensive realists' who were taking the lead under the Ahmadinejad administration, 'defensive realists' do not view foreign policy as a zero-sum game but as an arena in which win-win situations ought to be explored – especially with the United States. Another pivotal difference between these schools of thought is their estimation of U.S. power. While 'offensive realists' see the superpower's power-projection capabilities rapidly declining, the 'defensive' camp rightly acknowledges that even a U.S. in relative decline can inflict substantial damage on weaker countries like Iran. The historically unprecedented Iran sanctions regime is a prime example for the veracity of the latter view.

Ultimately, the agreement in its core has to be seen as an American-Iranian one which expresses the will of both sides to secure their interests in a rapidly changing regional geopolitical landscape. To what extent this will affect the Washington's traditional regional allies in Tel Aviv and Riyadh will be highly interesting to watch.

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