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Introduction: Studying the Impacts of Economic Sanctions in  
Iran: Everyday Life, Power, and Foreign Policy

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## Introduction: Studying the Impacts of Economic Sanctions in Iran: Everyday Life, Power, and Foreign Policy

“In the past two months, our house has been burglarized three times,” a retired doctor in the city of Isfahan, recounted. He continued:

It’s gotten to the point where the burglars have even taken the pipes we had for our plumbing. That’s how badly people need money—the black markets are thriving and for some it’s the only way to make ends meet. When I called the police to report the burglary, they said to me, “We’ll try our best, but there are so many burglaries now that we want to be upfront with you, the likelihood that we’ll find anything is slim.” And you know what, I can’t blame whoever our robber is—in the past two years . . . shoot, in the past month . . . prices of daily goods have gone so high that the only way to survive is stealing.

In interview after interview, Iranians from across the country have recounted how “utterly insane” the rise in prices has been since the increase of comprehensive US sanctions under President Trump, which President Biden has continued unabated as of this writing. They talk about how it is forcing them to cut back on purchases or pawn their jewelry or other goods. Or they tell me that they are exasperated, uncertain of how to move forward. Middle-class families bemoan the loss of their life savings and are anxious about their futures and those of their children. In the meantime, the rich are getting richer, and the fortunes of those tied to the business sectors of the Revolutionary Guard and clerical class have mushroomed. This exponential growth in wealth coincides with the descent of over eight million individuals from the middle class to the lower-middle class, while the ranks of the poor have swelled by more than four million.<sup>1</sup> In response to these shocks to Iran’s economy, new social classes are emerging, social bonds are changing, and domestic politics has swung toward the hardliners, as civil liberties continue to be curtailed.

The most-sanctioned country in the world, Iran has been under continuous Western (predominantly US) sanctions for four decades. Sanctions are a historical process in Iran—indeed, throughout the Middle East and increasingly in other regions of the world. It is now nearly impossible to analyze contemporary societies in Iran, the wider Middle East, certain parts of Africa and Latin America, and increasingly Russia and China, without considering the multilayered impacts of economic sanctions. While the United States, wary of traditional warfare after its experiences in the post-9/11 forever wars, relies ever more heavily on sanctions as a key foreign policy tool, there has been insufficient critical theorization or empirical research about what economic sanctions do to impacted countries and how economic sanctions regimes intersect with warfare, international law,

and human rights. Yet sanctions present us with a series of ethical questions, as sanctions are inextricable from US policy. In this dossier, we are four researchers and ethnographers of Iran who take a longitudinal look at the myriad ways economic sanctions have impacted Iranian society, culture, and politics.

Western leaders and policymakers have touted economic sanctions as peaceful tools that offer an alternative to war since they were created in the interwar period. With the wreckage of World War I around them, the idea that policymakers, lawyers, and bankers sitting behind desks in Western capitals could leverage a certain kind of power that would help avoid conflicts and diminish the need for troops had been appealing to many. Government involvement, operating as economic sanctions, is meant to exert extreme pressure on targeted states and their societies and induce behavioral change. In fact, US president Woodrow Wilson remarked that economic sanctions “brings a nation to its senses just as suffocation removes from the individual all inclinations to fight . . . Apply this economic, peaceful, silent, deadly remedy and there will be no need for force. It is a terrible remedy. It does not cost a life outside of the nation boycotted, but it brings a pressure upon that nation which, in my judgement, no modern nation could resist.”<sup>2</sup> When economic sanctions were first conceived of after World War I, governments assumed that they would not be used.<sup>3</sup> Sanctions’ devastating impact would be worse than war, which would deter countries from engaging in adventurous foreign policy behavior that would disturb the international order. As we move from the twentieth into the twenty-first century, we can see clearly how Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, coming on the heels of the devastating impact of US sanctions on Iran, shows that the deterrence value of sanctions is not what it is made out to be.

As this economic weapon evolved throughout the twentieth century, it has turned into “one of liberal internationalism’s most enduring innovations of the twentieth century.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, today, economic sanctions are among the most salient tools in US foreign policy. US sanctions have increased by more than 900 percent since the start of the twenty-first century.<sup>5</sup> As Americans become warier of troop deployments, economic sanctions appear to be an “appealing” alternative—a sense that “we are doing something” without the costs and overt violence associated with war.

What do prolonged economic sanctions actually “do” to a targeted nation? And are they, in fact, a costless tool for the United States and the Western-led international system? Despite the fact that Iran has been under decades of Western sanctions, little systematic knowledge exists on the short-, medium-, and long-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 the tightening of sanctions: currency depreciation, inflation, and recession, which are followed by increases in unemployment and poverty. But the more comprehensive picture is lost in political cacophony around the policy’s perceived merits and shortcomings.

This increase in a largely unexamined tool makes it especially crucial to study sanctions from the perspective of its targets. The research and literature on the impacts of sanctions, especially over time, remains insufficient.<sup>6</sup> The current scholarly literature on sanctions comes primarily from the fields of international relations, economics, and public health. The vast majority of this literature is from the perspective of the implementation of sanctions, relations between states, and political behavior. Some studies have explored

the philosophical ethics of sanctions and others have documented public health impacts.<sup>7</sup> Scholars have observed humanitarian catastrophes resulting from comprehensive sanctions, such as food shortages, the breakdown of medical systems, and the unavailability of critical medicines, which have led to hundreds of thousands of deaths.<sup>8</sup> Economic sanctions also target critical infrastructure and the opportunities available for knowledge producers, professionals, and students, impacting the aspirations of targeted populations. Over time, this arrangement leads to compounded crises that span generations, from interrupted social reproduction, to brain drain, to a decline in the quality of education, as the authors of this dossier demonstrate in their papers. In this literature, there remains a dearth of ethnographic research on how sanctions affect civilian populations. Because sanctions are designed to exert pressure on the population with the hope that it will then rise up and force the government to change its behavior, we must turn our lens to the everyday ramifications of sanctions. Ethnography and ethnographic research is uniquely positioned to interrogate what sanctions “do” to targeted societies and how sanctions play out in the everyday lives of populations. Drawing from Ilana Feldman’s study of how humanitarian conditions reshape the lives of Palestinians living under regimes of aid—what she refers to as “lives lived in relief,” in this dossier and broader work, we explore what it means for the hundreds of millions of people living under the myriad regimes of economic sanctions around the world.<sup>9</sup>

Prolonged sanctions regimes create waves within the social body, leading to the rise of new social classes, new economies (especially in black and gray markets), new coping mechanisms, the flight of intellectuals, the breakdown of infrastructure, and the further militarization of politics in impacted countries. In this dossier, we ask: What do economic siege and comprehensive sanctions do to a country’s society, culture, and politics? What happens when members of the middle class confront the (often sudden) loss of value of their income and savings? How does this shaking up of class and economic relations impact society and politics? Prolonged sanctions lead not only to immediate shocks in a country’s economy, but also to generational impacts akin to war.

The intervention of this dossier is to shift the predominant framework of analysis away from sanctions as statecraft seen from the point of view of sanctioning countries, away from whether sanctions “succeed” or “fail” to achieve their policy aims, even away from the macro-economic impact of sanctions on a country’s economy.<sup>10</sup> Instead, we focus on the impacts of economic sanctions on the targeted country’s society, culture, and politics. As ethnographers, we are concerned with the ways in which these macro-politics and international crises involving the United States and Iran play out in the everyday lives of Iranians. We conducted the research for this work mainly during the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” policy against Iran, which commenced after the US withdrawal from the “Iran nuclear deal,” formally, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and implemented over one thousand new sanctions on Iran in less than two years. Like other comprehensive sanctions regimes, the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign is not only one of economic sanctions. “Maximum pressure” also entails covert operations; cyberattacks; propaganda wars; travel bans against civilians; and the criminalization of Iranian citizens broadly, including the deportation of Iranian students with valid US student visas. It also included the assassination of Iran’s top general, Qassem Soleimani, and nearly led the United States and Iran to war on

multiple occasions—further bringing into question the claim by sanctions proponents that economic sanctions lessen conflict.

Importantly, the economic sanctions implemented during this time, including an oil embargo, were designed to collapse Iran's economy and, especially, to target factory workers, with the hope of leading to large-scale protests. When massive nationwide protests did develop in November 2019 over the sudden increase in fuel prices, the Iranian state cut off the internet and violently suppressed protestors, leading to anywhere from 230 to 1,500 deaths.<sup>11</sup> The widespread #MahsaAmini national uprisings that began in September 2022 after the death of Jina Mahsa Amini at the hands of Iran's so-called morality police were similarly met with severe repression, with thousands imprisoned, over five hundred dead (as of this writing), dozens facing the death penalty and three executed (as of this writing).

Yet, throughout this time, neither Iran's economy nor its state capacity collapsed. Rather, Iranian politics have become more hardline, the middle class is quickly hollowing out, poverty has increased over ten-fold, the regime is increasingly repressive domestically, and regionally, Iran continues its anti-United States and anti-Israel activities. In essence, "maximum pressure" weakened the Iranian population and made it more dependent on the state, while leading to further securitizing and militarizing of the domestic sphere and making Iran more defiant in regional politics.<sup>12</sup>

Iranians are now facing what Yarimar Bonilla, writing about Puerto Rico and its neighbors, has called "disaster swarms."<sup>13</sup> Disaster swarms characterize places facing "economic crisis, imperial violence . . . earthquakes . . . climate change, privatization, profiteering, and other forms of structural and systemic violence all acting as a disordered jumble upon a collective body that cannot discern a main event or a discrete set of impacts, only repetitive and enduring trauma."<sup>14</sup> In the case of Iran, maximum pressure sanctions coincided with seemingly endless waves of COVID-19 (with Iran being the most impacted country in the Middle East), increased tensions between Iran and its regional adversaries, chronic state mismanagement, droughts and other environmental crises, and increased social and political repression. These day-to-day realities also lead to what Omar Dewachi (writing about Iraq under sanctions during the 1990s) has called an ecology and discourse of "state failure," whereby citizens repeatedly bemoan the state's inability to meet the needs of its population.<sup>15</sup> In the case of Iran, the combination of decades of neoliberal governmentality, chronic mismanagement, economic sanctions, corruption, political and social repression, and media wars has led to both conditions of disaster swarm and discourses of state failure.

In this dossier, our aim is to ethnographically show how economic sanctions impact nearly every aspect of life in a targeted society. Within the academic literature, economic sanctions are mostly examined by economists and scholars in public health and international relations. We are interested in turning the lens in another direction by employing ethnography's unique ability to track the complexities of everyday life. We look at how the daily impacts of sanctions create new sociocultural and political realities that have long-term impacts, both domestically and transnationally. Furthermore, in this introduction, my aim is to call attention to economic sanctions not just as a "problem" with which scholars of sanctioned countries have to contend, but as an issue that implicates scholars of international law, humanitarianism, and human rights as economic sanctions increase in implementation as a punitive tool in foreign policy.<sup>16</sup>

## The Moral Questions Economic Sanctions Demand

International relations scholars and policymakers often see sanctions as an “alternative to war” and a tool for global governance. But, is this really the case?

The attempted economic suffocation of a nation—with the stated goal of inflicting pain on people to influence the behavior of their government—raises serious moral questions about economic sanctions. Richard Nephew, a key US sanctions policymaker on Iran in the Bush and Obama administrations, writes:

Because of the different practical effects of sanctions and military force, policymakers treat these two tools differently. Military conflict creates causalities and damage for each side, and the results are visible for all to see. The impacts of sanctions can be less visible and may seem less destructive, certainly on a visceral level. This no doubt explains part of the attractiveness of sanctions as a tool of force . . . *But on a strategic level, the imposition of pain via sanctions is intended to register the same impulses in an adversary as those imposed via military force . . .* And just because the damage wrought by sanctions may be less visible (at least, with some sanctions regimes), it need not be less destructive, particularly for economically vulnerable populations that may be affected (emphasis mine).<sup>17</sup>

Prolonged and severe sanctions damage societies and economies in ways that cannot be easily reversed when and if sanctions are lifted. It is the population that is punished for its government’s behavior, and it is the population that is tasked to compel the government to change its ways. Although bombs are not dropped, creating visual evidence of war, long-term economic sanctions generate an environment of siege, shortage, and intense pressure in sanctioned countries. This invisibility, as Nephew points, is precisely the point.

When economic sanctions were first conceived, the architects were open about the intent and effect of sanctions. Their goal for sanctions was “to instill fear in civilians.”<sup>18</sup> And this was why, in the interwar period, economic sanctions were meant to reduce aggression and avert war. But, as use of sanctions has become routinized, policymakers rarely acknowledge sanctions’ impact on individuals.

Unlike “just war” theory—in which noncombatants should be protected—in sanctions regimes, the distinction between combatants and noncombatants is purposefully blurred. If the goal of sanctions is to inflict enough pain on a society to pressure the political elite to change behavior, the target in fact becomes “noncombatants,” ordinary people, violating the very terms of warfare in the current international order. Sanctions can be painted by policymakers as “victimless,” but in actuality they present us with an ethical dilemma: prolonged comprehensive sanctions regimes distribute pain and death so widely that they function as a low-visibility weapon that muddies our understanding of agency precisely because the sanctioning state can plausibly deny the impacts of sanctions. Thus, when activists, humanitarians, or scholars point to what sanctions are “doing” in a targeted country such as Iran, a ready response by proponents of sanctions may be: “No, that’s not the fault of sanctions, that’s the fault of economic mismanagement.” Sanctions allow for culpability to be averted. The logic of sanctions, from the point of view of policymakers, is warlike. Yet unlike with traditional wars, we have not developed any rules to curtail the harm to civilian populations. In this reality, in which comprehensive

economic sanctions amount to an attempted siege of the targeted population, it is incumbent to ask: How do we as social scientists develop more robust ways of thinking about sanctions? And, why are there no international regulations to bear upon comprehensive sanctions regimes? As this introduction and dossier show, the population of a sanctioned country is precisely the target of comprehensive sanctions regimes, while those in power increase their wealth as a by-product of sanctions-busting.

Wielding economic sanctions as a foreign policy—which we demonstrate in this dossier has impoverished the Iranian middle class and fostered hardship and poverty among civilian populations—simply is not morally superior to targeting civilians in warfare.

### **History of Iran Sanctions**

Soon after they were originated, economic sanctions were used without a declaration of war on states that defied Western norms: the Soviet republics of Russia and Hungary in 1919. These states were blockaded because, from the beginning, sanctions “were considered suitable for use mainly against peripheral European states and ‘semi-civilized’ countries.”<sup>19</sup> In the case of Iran, then, the history of sanctions—who is sanctioned, and what that means about the true principles of the international community—cannot be overlooked, by Iranians or by those studying how sanctions really work.

Iran was first targeted by sanctions in 1951—in this case, by the UK, after Iran nationalized its oil fields, which had predominantly been owned by UK interests. That round of sanctions lasted until 1953, when an American- and British-backed coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq reinstated the shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Twenty-six years later, in 1979, a popular revolution led to the ousting of the Shah and the demand for independence from foreign powers. Convinced that the United States could stage another coup from its embassy in Tehran, revolutionaries stormed the US embassy multiple times in 1979, and those aligned with Ayatollah Khomeini took US hostages in November 1979. The first unilateral US sanctions were imposed on Iran during that crisis, including freezing over \$8 billion in Iranian assets abroad and imposing a trade embargo. In 1984, the United States named Iran a “state sponsor of terrorism,” and in 1995, President Clinton imposed a sweeping embargo on all US trade with Iran.

However, given that US-Iran trade was never significant after the revolution of 1979, the United States sought to discourage other countries from trading with Iran. In 1996, the United States enacted the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), which targeted new investments in Iran’s oil and gas sectors, aiming to compel US allies to adopt a unified stance against Iran. Starting in 2005, the United States began to threaten financial institutions with being cut off from the US financial system if they did business with Iran. From 2006 to 2010, Iran came under a series of multilateral and international sanctions arising from questions over its nuclear activities. These sanctions were driven by US policymakers, who “could see that our efforts to target the interconnections between Iran and the global economy were starting to complicate Iranian life.”<sup>20</sup> By 2008, Undersecretary of the Treasury Stuart Levey testified before the Senate Finance Committee: “The world’s leading financial institutions have largely stopped dealing with Iran . . . in any currency.”<sup>21</sup> As the UN imposed new sanctions on Iran, the United States sought to magnify the harms of the sanctions on Iran, in order to “undermine Iran’s claim of normalcy and legitimacy, and to increase the sense of risk in international businesses

and banks.”<sup>22</sup> From there, the United States began to target insurance providers “to tie all types of services to the underlying potential illicit acts. In doing so, it spread the burden and risks of business with Iran to wider circles of the global economy.”<sup>23</sup>

With the start of the administration of President Obama in 2009, “sanctions experts at the Departments of State and Energy were working away at developing further ideas for sanctions against Iran.”<sup>24</sup> In November 2009, the Obama administration helped lead three concurrent sanctions strategies against Iran: UN sanctions, informal multilateral measures, and US domestic pressure on foreign corporations and banks. Starting in 2010, under the stewardship of the United States, the idea of partner sanctions came into effect, whereby partners (the EU, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Canada) were to develop sanctions options that would track the UN resolutions and increase their impact. These partner nations agreed to treat Iran’s financial sector like a pariah. “Iran was seen as being ‘special,’ and not in a good way . . . The result was that, although some large companies persevered and some small companies took the risk, there was a flood of institutions out of Iran in 2010.”<sup>25</sup> In that same year, President Obama signed the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act into law, in effect creating the basis for a financial embargo of Iran. The law made it possible to deny foreign banks the ability to conduct business in the United States if they processed transactions for Iranian financial institutions. Very few banks were willing to lose access to the United States for Iran. This period was followed by five years (2010–2015) of even harsher unilateral and multilateral sanctions, most of which were lifted with the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. Once Trump unilaterally pulled out of the JCPOA in May 2018, a new round of sanctions ensued that continue to this day.<sup>26</sup>

Scholars and pundits often point to the ways in which US sanctions policies allow for the continued trade of humanitarian goods. However, the experience of societies under comprehensive sanctions, including secondary sanctions and sanctions on financial trade, demonstrate that in reality when a country is sanctioned in the way Iran has been for over a decade, the “humanitarian exceptions” of sanctions policies do not correspond into reality. As Nephew admits, “If you intentionally reduce a country’s ability to earn foreign currency through exports, then you will almost by definition create at least some pressure on imports, including food and medicine.” He continues, “Moreover, the irony of all of this is that sanctions are ultimately intended to cause pain and change policy: denying some of that pain may make for better public relations for a sanctions program, but it also undermines the contention that sanctions work and may even interfere with their effectiveness on a practical level.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Sanctions as an Enemy-Defining Strategy**

Beyond being tools of economic pressure, economic sanctions are, in essence, an enemy-defining strategy, by both design and implementation. First, they define a certain politics of enmity that are held in place throughout time (i.e., “Our enemies are the countries that we sanction”). This enemy-defining process is reciprocal in the sense that the targeted countries, such as Iran, Cuba, Venezuela, North Korea, and Syria, also define their enemy vis-à-vis economic sanctions (i.e., “Our enemies are the imperialists that sanction us”). Second, this logic of enmity proliferates beyond relations between sanctioner and sanctioned to the international community writ large. In the case of Iran, for example, as I discussed above, the United States actively worked for years to make any contact or trade

with Iran toxic, especially for European countries, South Korea, and Japan, which needed energy trade with Iran. This concomitant depiction of Iran as a “pariah” state through direct economic sanctions and messaged via media is an attempt to present Iran as an enemy not only of the United States, but also of the global world order. The United States, Iran, and other states become paralyzed by this logic of enmity, making it nearly impossible to lift sanctions, as we saw with Trump pulling out of the Obama-era Iran deal and the harsh reactions to the JCPOA by members of Congress from both parties. Embedded in this enemy-making dynamic are affective logics whereby Iran (for the West) and the West (for Iran) become opponents committed to a zero-sum game of destruction.

What happens when a society is defined as “enemy” to the international system, outside of a formal declaration of war? How does this characterization affect the conduct of everyday life, internal domestic developments, the international movement of citizens, and the wider sociopolitical context of a people? In Iran, economic sanctions have been implemented in tandem with the United States listing Iran as a “terrorist state,” further blocking international travel, student visas, and the movement of professionals for academic and medical conferences and artistic exchanges. The vagueness of language in the sanctions regulations themselves have led to overcompliance by literary and scientific publishing houses, which have issued directives not to publish work from Iranian writers or researchers.<sup>28</sup> This vague language has also led US universities to curtail the academic freedom of social science researchers to conduct research in places such as Iran and Venezuela.<sup>29</sup> Only through extensive legal fights has the US Department of Treasury admitted that these entities are over-interpreting the sanctions. Yet, despite the ensuing clarifications, most sanctions regulations continue to be vague. The point, I contend, is to maintain the vagueness in language as a tool in the enemy-defining strategy. By making interactions with Iran sanctionable and depicting the country as “special and not in a good way,” as sanction policymakers have declared, US policymakers have made not just the Iranian government, but Iranian citizens, pariahs in every realm of business, exchange, and engagement<sup>30</sup>.

Enemy-making, of which sanctions are one tool, has become so structurally entrenched that sanctions-lifting has become a conundrum for US policymakers.<sup>31</sup> In the case of Iran, the economic sanctions are designed and implemented through various branches and agencies of government: Congress, the Department of Treasury, and the executive branch. Thus, when the United States agrees to some sanction’s relief, such as during the JCPOA with Iran, it was only able to lift a small portion of the sanctions in place. Most economic sanctions are actually embedded through laws enacted by the US Congress; to lift them becomes almost impossible against states like Iran or Cuba, precisely because of the ways these states have been defined as enemies. The multistranded reality of sanctions has created a knot in the middle of US foreign policy, whereby heavily sanctioned states have realized that negotiations with the United States cannot lead to economic relief. Thus, economic sanctions, rather than lessen conflicts have further entrenched them.

### **Sanctions Lead to Militarization of Society**

Sanctions are supposed to be an alternative to military action, but in reality they militarize the dynamics inside the sanctioned nation. Comprehensive sanctions regimes inherently criminalize trade across borders and make international trade extremely costly.

Sanctioned countries do not stop trading, and ones that have had anti-imperialist revolutionary movements, such as Iran, look for ways around what they consider to be US bullying. For example, Iran sent ships full of oil and diesel to Venezuela (2020) and Lebanon/Syria (2021), in direct violation of US sanctions. Whether in outright violation of US sanctions, or (as has usually been the case) more discretely, goods have to go through multiple hands and take a longer route, via black and gray markets. In such circumstances, bribes, kickbacks, and money laundering become the norm. Independent businesses cannot afford to take the extreme risks inherent in trade under such conditions, leaving enterprises tied to the state and the military to become the main drivers of the economy. Not only do militaries exercise control over the country's borders, taking further bribes and kickbacks for smuggled goods, but they also begin to take a larger and larger share of the economy through their business ventures (see Bajoghli, this volume).

Furthermore, economic sanctions often target enterprises connected with a nation's military. As one of the main US sanctions policymakers on Iran notes, from 2006 to 2010, "The IRGC, already powerful in Iran domestically, was also portrayed by Washington as being at the center of all Iranian government conduct. Again, this claim had a factual basis. But the intent of the US strategy was to make the IRGC and Iran inseparable concepts with the aim of chilling even still legal forms of business with Iran under the precept that no one could know outside Iran whether the IRGC was involved in or the beneficiary of transactions at a deep level."<sup>32</sup>

Yet, US sanctions policies throughout the years only strengthened the IRGC: "Ironically, the US sanctions and hostility toward the IRGC forced the Iranian system both to rely upon and to support the IRGC. The IRGC was a primary means whereby Iran could procure sensitive items otherwise prohibited under sanctions . . . For this reason, as Iran grew poorer and more vulnerable to economic pressure, the IRGC grew stronger."<sup>33</sup> This outcome should not have been a surprise to US policymakers. Comprehensive sanctions are a form of economic warfare that inevitably end up drawing in the military establishments of targeted states to counteract economic siege and covert military operations against them. Only large entities such as the state or the military can ensure the continued flow of goods across borders as trade becomes increasingly risky due to comprehensive sanctions regimes. As I show in my article in this dossier, the IRGC built robust networks with military and security apparatuses in Cuba and Venezuela to bust through US sanctions. In all three of these countries, the political and domestic spheres have become more militarized and securitized in response to being targeted by years of comprehensive US sanctions regimes, and in turn, they have continued to increase repressive measures on their populations.

Not only do the coffers of military enterprises become more robust with sanctions-busting, but also the domestic atmosphere becomes even more securitized. As mentioned, US comprehensive sanctions regimes are not only an economic tool, but also a tool meant to inflict pain on the targeted society in order to incite some kind of "behavioral change." Sanctions architects argue that economic sanctions lead to revolt against the ruling elite. Although hardships caused by sanctions can lead to popular protests (Iran 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022; Cuba 2021), the targeted state—in a defensive position due to economic warfare, cyberwar, covert operations, and media wars—responds with a disproportionate use of force against its own population. In Iran, in particular, the repression against protestors has been extremely violent. To be clear, the Islamic Republic has responded to

its domestic opponents with extreme violence since its inception. But under comprehensive sanctions, even the spaces activists and dissidents were able to painstakingly carve out for years become targeted by the state. In this way, comprehensive economic sanctions have caused targeted states to further securitize their domestic sphere as targeted populations become more vulnerable. In such circumstances, especially in countries with purported anti-imperialist political establishments, the intelligence-military apparatus begins to look for places where the United States and its allies are inflicting pressure and attempting to “change behavior,” beyond economic pressure. Thus, spaces such as civil society and journalism become targets of state repression. The situation becomes further complicated when “opposition leaders” abroad state on television or social media that they help organize and fund groups in order to incite mass uprisings domestically, as was the case with both Iranian and Cuban opposition groups and leaders after massive uprisings in each country (2019 and 2022 with Iran, and 2021 in Cuba). The ruling establishment uses these examples to claim that all activism is foreign-supported and should therefore be repressed, which is one main reason Iranian civil society activists inside Iran have continued to call for an easing of sanctions as they only lead to more securitization domestically. Furthermore, when countries are as comprehensively sanctioned as Iran, the United States or European countries are left with very little leverage when the Iranian regime represses protestors so violently, as the reactions to the #MahsaAmini uprisings demonstrate.

With the increased implementation of economic sanctions against more countries, there is an important opportunity for scholars of human rights, development, and international law, along with social scientists who study sanctioned countries, to shed more light on the myriad ways economic sanctions work and to ask critical questions about what sanctions actually do. If economic sanctions continue to be used as an alternative to war, what are the conditions this alternative policy produces? What do they mean for impacted countries and societies, and for the international system more broadly? Do economic sanctions, in fact, decrease conflict?

### **Summary of Dossier Papers**

This dossier is the first attempt at a multilayered analysis of the impacts of sanctions on the social, cultural, and political lives of Iranians. The articles here further critical scholarship on the humanitarian impacts of sanctions on targeted societies, with particular attention to the lives lived under sanctions. Sanctions impact every facet of life for those who live under prolonged sanctions regimes. This sort of economic siege not only creates vast economic fluctuations, but also forces populations to live through constant humanitarian crises, precarity, curtailment of movement (furthered in the case of Iran under Trump’s Muslim ban), and isolation from international communities of knowledge production. The last point has particularly impacted scientists, physicians, social scientists, writers, and artists, as sanctions have created barriers to publication in academic journals, hindered research that involves international grants, and even blocked participation in conferences and exhibitions.

Arzoo Osanloo suggests that neoliberal governmentality and a history of legality in the service of postcolonial empire have created a reality whereby sanctions are an everyday presence, both real and imagined, in shaping human life and social relations as well as perceptions of choices, both in present and future aspirations. The shift from being a

merely *isolated* country to being a *sanctioned* one shapes human relationships, aspirations, desires, and even tastes. In this way, sanctions are not just a form of economic pressure, but also “entanglements born of alienation” rather than engagement.<sup>34</sup> Based on ethnographic research in Iran since 2018, Osanloo brings her fieldwork to bear on questions of international law and human rights law as they pertain to sanctions policy as an “alternative” to war.

Nazanin Shahrokni’s article seeks to go beyond mainstream analysis of the effects of sanctions on the Iranian economy and the state, and focus instead on the changing organization of social reproduction. What does it mean, Shahrokni asks, when the effects of continued sanctions regimes are shifted to the household because the state can no longer guarantee income stability and has partially withdrawn essential services that have traditionally alleviated some of the burden households (primarily women) must bear? Shahrokni captures dimensions of sanctions as “a fact of life” embedded in everyday coping practices.

Leili Sreberny-Mohammadi analyzes the numerous direct and indirect consequences of sanctions on the visual arts. She draws on ten years of research on the circulation of Iranian art through international exhibitions and the global art market, particularly in the United Arab Emirates, Europe, and the United States under Obama-era and Trump-era sanctions. Although technically artworks fall under the category of “information and informational materials” and are not sanctioned, given the financial sanctions on Iran, the trade and/or exhibition of art is sanctioned in practice. In this article, Sreberny-Mohammadi looks critically at how the Western ideals of a Kantian philosophy that art is an exceptional field of life that should be protected and valued also embeds it within the logic of sanctions. For Kant, art is a vehicle for expressing both truth and beauty, unpolluted by either the political or economic. When “Art” embodies these ideas, it is frequently imagined as a salve, a balm to the ills of society, or a mirror to its problems. The artist is a special genius, both a voice and savior for society. The Iranian artist specifically is then savior of the nation. Sreberny-Mohammadi asks what happens to these voices and their art when sanctions designed to strangle a nation are deployed. What obstacles do they create for this vehicle of salvation?

My article in this dossier is based on fieldwork conducted over nearly two decades in Iran and Latin America (mainly Cuba), following the multiple political, economic, and cultural relationships developed between Iran, Venezuela, and Cuba since 2008, as a way to bust sanctions. What can we learn about economic sanctions when we look at the lived experiences of those building alliances to bust sanctions? What do these alliances show us about what economic sanctions do and mean for those in power in sanctioned countries? Through the lens of political anthropology, this article explores the microsocial relations of those who have solidified alliances for sanctions-busting and asks what it teaches us about economic sanctions more broadly.

## Conclusion

The day after I spoke with the retired doctor in Isfahan whose home had been burglarized three times in the span of one month, I had a conversation with a middle-aged engineer in the city of Karaj, west of Tehran. We have known each other for many years and were catching up via a WhatsApp phone call. Knowing that I had not been to Iran since Trump’s imposition of new sanctions and the outbreak of COVID-19 that came on its

heels, he said to me, “You wouldn’t even be able to fathom the rise in prices here anymore. Don’t even ask me to explain it to you. I can’t get my own head around how much the price of food goes up from one minute to the next, let alone try to explain it for someone whose concept of prices is from the before-times. This is a whole different reality than the one you remember. Nothing makes sense anymore.” Similarly, a woman in her midthirties, a working journalist in Tehran, explained the conditions to me this way: “These sanctions feel like a never-ending war on all fronts. Every week we’re all poorer. The shelves around us are all full, but things are further and further out of reach. And yet the high-end restaurants and cafés are all full of customers. It’s exhausting to watch and to live. And then the endless COVID waves and the droughts and blackouts over the summer. The state imprisons those who dare to challenge this absurdity. Where’s the hope? I get glimpses of it some days, but overall, everything is bleak.”

Iranians attempt to make sense out of their ever-shifting sanctions-laden reality, which includes the fast hollowing out of the middle classes, the rapid increase in poverty, and the fast foreclosing upon hopes for the future. With the United States’ increased use of sanctions as a main foreign policy tool, the ethical questions of sanctions as an “alternative to war” become even more important to consider and prod. It is important as scholars to understand the realities of sanctions on impacted populations.

As this introduction and the articles in this dossier demonstrate, sanctions are far from an alternative to war, targeting ordinary citizens and implemented without regard or regulation. On a practical level, the United States’ overreliance on sanctions presents a policy conundrum because sanctions-lifting has proven extremely difficult, leaving little incentive for countries that are under comprehensive US sanctions regimes to “comply” with US demands. As an enemy-defining tool, sanctions produce a reality in which any exit ramp becomes more and more elusive, hardening international conflicts, and leading to more, not less, violence, militarization, and securitization. With a US domestic population that is tired of forever wars and military engagement, sanctions are a way for US policymakers to say and feel that they are “doing something” about a “problematic” state, even as they primarily make the local populations suffer.

Sanctions create new sociopolitical realities that impact the everyday lives of targeted populations, weaken citizens, and further entrench those at the politico-military helm. It is time that, as scholars invested in questions of morality, humanitarianism, international law, and human rights, we shine a more sustained and critical lens on economic sanctions and their meanings for the future of war, foreign policy, and everyday life.

## NOTES

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3. Nicholas Mulder, *The Economic Weapon: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), 4–5.

4. Mulder, *Economic Weapon*, 4.

5. The Department of the Treasury, “The Treasury 2021 Sanctions Review,” October 2021, <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/Treasury-2021-sanctions-review.pdf>

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7. For more on ethics of sanctions, see: Stephanides, Joseph, Thomas J. Biersteker, Loretta Bondi, Michael Brzoska, Jarat Chopra, Richard W. Conroy, Anthonius W. de Vries, et al. *Smart Sanctions: Targeting Economic Statecraft*. Edited by David Cortright and George A. Lopez. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002; Gordon, Joy. "Economic Sanctions, Just War Doctrine, and the 'Fearful Spectacle of the Civilian Dead.'" *CrossCurrents* 49, no. 3 (1999): 387–400. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24460472>. On public health ramifications, see: Brotherton, P. Sean. *Revolutionary Medicine: Health and the Body in Post-Soviet Cuba*. Experimental Futures. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.

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8. Hanna Garth, *Food in Cuba: The Pursuit of a Decent Meal* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2020), Omar Dewachi, *Ungovernable Life: Mandatory Medicine and Statecraft in Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), Joy Gordon, *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

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17. Richard Nephew, *The Art of Sanctions: A View from the Field* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 10–11

18. Mulder, *Economic Weapon*, 5

19. *Ibid.*, 8.

20. Nephew, *Art of Sanctions*, 68.

21. *Qtd ibid.*, 68.

22. *Ibid.*, 69

23. Ibid., 70
24. Ibid., 72.
25. Ibid, 77.
26. For a detailed look at Iran sanctions, please see Kenneth Katzman, *Iran sanctions*. RS20871 vols. Vol. RS20871. Congressional Research Service: Congressional Research Service (2019).
27. Ibid., 11–12.
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31. For the ways in which US media have partaken in narrative formations of “enemy” revolutionary states, see Narges Bajoghli “The Key to Heaven: Circulations of a Mythical Trope, American Anxieties, and Iran’s ‘Irrationality’” (forthcoming).
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33. Ibid., 131–2.
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