

CONCLUSION

“I don’t think Americans know very much about our country. All this talk about regional power and nuclear arms—that’s politicians talking. No one listens to them. We’re really a very simple people—like Americans.”

—MEHRAD, AN IRANIAN TOUR GUIDE⁶¹²

When I traveled to Iran with my two friends, none of us could have known what it was actually like. Elements of Western influence were everywhere—as evidenced by Iranians saying “merci” and using other French words in everyday conversation. Even though Islam had been introduced to the Persians 1,500 years ago, Iranian people still see their identity as “nothing like the Arab world”: they are ethnically distinct, speak Farsi instead of Arabic, practice a branch of Islam different than that of most Arab countries, and live within

⁶¹² Christopher Thornton, “The Iran We Don’t See: A Tour of the Country Where People Love Americans,” *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2012.

a different culture.⁶¹³ Having once been one of the greatest civilizations in the world, Iranian people are understandably proud of their heritage, and many traditions continue to be practiced today. At the same time, many people embrace the new and are up to date with the latest global developments, often getting their information from social media (as of 2018, Instagram and WhatsApp were not banned). It was not at all the dangerous country that we had expected it to be, based on the “do not travel” warnings placed by many foreign countries—not just the US.

But, more than anything we observed about this complicated country, we experienced immense kindness and generosity from the locals who went out of their way to make sure that we were welcome in their country. From our interactions and conversations, it became clear that these people’s hopes and dreams were not much different from my own. In the words of my friend Koohyar, “Iran is the same as other countries. People basically like the same things: to be happy, to have fun, to do interesting things, have a good life... It would be nice if people think more positively about Iran.”

Unfortunately, decades of sanctions have made life in Iran more difficult and unpredictable. For more vulnerable sections of the population, sanctions have prevented people from obtaining lifesaving medicine, or made it too expensive to afford food. People are driven into selling their homes or raising children in neighborhoods ridden with social problems. Education becomes a luxury when kids have to contribute to the family income and school supplies are unaffordable. As Sussan Tahmasebi, the director of FEMENA, which supports women human rights defenders, articulated:

⁶¹³ Ibid.

“While the [US] administration claims that sanctions are targeting those in power, the sanctions really impact the ordinary people, especially women, children, minorities, refugees, the disabled, and the sick. Sanctions have become a method of warfare, denying life-saving medicines to sick people, destroying livelihoods and plunging millions into poverty. [...] Most of those who have lost employment or who have suffered economically were already working in the economic margins. They were employed as day laborers or street peddlers, or providers of services. They were women-headed households, who despite low wages are responsible for entire families.”⁶¹⁴

The US—which prides itself on the protection of civil liberties by condemning human rights abuses around the world—is itself a perpetrator of human rights violations in Iran.

Though some people may have been hit particularly hard by the economic sanctions, to varying degrees, ordinary Iranian citizens have all been negatively impacted. At a minimum, the sudden and drastic changes to the economy from political decisions have damaged people’s ability to plan for the long-term—whether that’s for starting a business or purchasing a home. Scientists, artists, students, and others have likewise felt the negative impact of sanctions on their lives. Career and educational advancement opportunities become limited because people cannot study abroad, pay for research equipment, or attend international exhibitions.

⁶¹⁴ Madea Benjamin and Sussan Tahmasebi, “Iranian Women Squeezed by US Sanctions, COVID-19 and their Government,” *Common Dreams*, published on May 14, 2020.

When we spoke, Mori told me, “In the past seven or eight years, it [has been a] struggle to figure out what’s going on in Iran. It’s affecting my life, and I’m really tired. I want to go somewhere and live and not have to think about what the government is doing... I’m just tired, my mind is tired.” The weariness was clear in his voice. “I made perfect plans for my business and I was doing perfectly, and I was successful... I don’t complain, but if we had a better relationship with the rest of the world, it would be much easier. They cut off our connection with the rest of the world and it’s not our choice.”

To think that the damage is confined within the borders of Iran is also false. Iran’s environmental degradation and air pollution affect the global ecosystem and directly contribute to climate change. Critically endangered species only found in Iran cannot be properly protected. Moreover, restricting exchange between Iran and the international community is costly. Not only are people missing out on the intangible benefits such as understanding a different culture or peoples, but sanctions also cost foreign companies hundreds of billions of dollars in exports foregone or joint projects abandoned.

This book does not go into detail about the effectiveness of sanctions on Iran, nor does it discuss in length how poor government policies have contributed to sanctions’ unequal impacts on ordinary citizens. Nevertheless, it has hopefully demonstrated that sanctions are inherently problematic and infringe on the human rights of Iranian people. By doing so, the book has aimed to raise questions about whether sanctions are the appropriate policy tool in this context. Is it really impossible to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, to deter its support for terrorist groups, or to condemn its human rights violations, without first harming the Iranian people?

“In this game it’s only Iranian people who lose; who live under pressure,” said K, who lives in Tehran. “The instability last year, it was very crazy—it’s like you cannot plan your life, you cannot know what to do with your life because everything is changing, businesses are changing... Any plan you make can be affected. This is not healthy you know; they’re destroying the nation! It’s selfish from both governments, and between them, nobody cares about Iranian people.”

What You Can Do to Help

For politicians

Currently, human rights concerns do not seem to be sufficiently incorporated into the policymaking process. Despite claims that humanitarian aid is exempt from sanctions, this book has hopefully shown that this does not seem to be the case in practice, and Iranian people’s human rights are not properly respected. Establishing a norm that places greater emphasis on adopting non-invasive strategies, such as using diplomacy or other negotiation tactics, and avoiding using sanctions as a means of political signaling (to a domestic audience, for instance) would reduce the possibility of inflicting further unintended harm.

Rather than using threats and coercion when dealing with Iran, recognizing and addressing the regime’s perception of external threats as well as its core domestic issues could encourage a foundation of trust between negotiating parties. This is essential for restarting negotiations, especially because the US had reneged on its previous Iran strategy by exiting

the JCPOA. By demanding the removal of sanctions, Iran desires—or at the very least, accepts—that sanctions relief would entail reintegration with the international community. Fostering this kind of trade and exchange could increase the country's incentives to cooperate with its trading partners. Strengthening Iran's trade dependence is important for the West, not only because it helps tie Iranian interests to those of liberal societies, but also because it opens up the range of policy tools that can be used in the future, if necessary.

The United States, as an advocate for democracy and human rights, has a responsibility to act consistently and diplomatically with other countries. Re-evaluating decades-old foreign policy positions and attempting to shift away from them may be difficult in practice, but doing so would command respect from the international community.

For the General Public

Based on the US political system, public perception and government policy are mutually reinforcing—government officials design policy platforms based on the opinions of its voter base, and the people often form judgments about foreign policy based on the rhetoric of their policymakers. The American public therefore has an important voice that has the potential to influence policy decisions. By understanding that Iran is more complex than merely being “the enemy” and urging policymakers to pay greater attention to humanitarian consequences, people have the ability to shift America's policy focus from an antagonistic perspective that presumes Iran's irrationality to one that addresses the regime's core strategic interests. Generating negative public

attention on hostile US policy strategies, such as comprehensive sanctions, may hopefully compel policymakers to consider other tools that inflict less collateral damage.

Beyond influencing policy, there are also smaller ways to humanize the Iranian people. Learning about the country beyond the images of the regime typically depicted in Western media, supporting Iranian artists and creatives, and thinking critically about policy externalities are all possible ways to foster a nuanced understanding of Iran. For those looking for further resources, organizations such as the Human Rights Watch, or the Center for Human Rights in Iran, have written extensively about human rights related issues in Iran, including sanctions. Think-tanks like the Atlantic Council or Council on Foreign Relations bring more policy-oriented perspectives to the sanctions issue. Other special-interest publications such as *Artnet* or *Science Magazine* have also included articles about sanctions' effects on art and science, respectively. Radio Farda, BBC Persian, and other international news agencies such as *The Guardian*, and *Reuters* provide wide coverage of Iran while remaining independent from government influences. Those who would like to actively contribute could raise awareness or support the work of nonprofits such as the Center for Human Rights in Iran, Amnesty International, or other focus-specific organizations such as FEMENA, which aims to support women human rights defenders in the Middle East and North African regions, or the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), which provides basic humanitarian services to displaced Afghans in Iran and supports their Iranian host communities.^{615, 616}

615 “FEMENA Home Page,” FEMENA, accessed October 23, 2020, <https://femena.net/>.

616 “NRC in Iran,” Norwegian Refugee Council, accessed October 22, 2020.

When we spoke, A had this to say: “Most Europeans and Americans think Iranians are terrorists, but it’s not true. If they want to learn about Iran and about Persia, they can read history, they can come to Iran, and watch some documentaries to know us better. Because as you know, most Iranians are really welcoming, they love having guests. They are peaceful, they are warm. But you don’t hear these things on the news. If people could come here and see from near how we are doing, then maybe it would be the best way.”

As evidenced by the dramatic changes of approval ratings for Iran and the US towards each other in the past decades, public perception is malleable. Maybe shifting domestic perspectives and demands can spark renewed, constructive dialogue between America and Iran.

