



## PERSPECTIVES

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# The Dangers of Lifting Sanctions on the Islamic Regime of Iran

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Now that President Biden has been installed in the White House, the Islamic regime in Iran is hopeful that US sanctions on the country will soon be lifted. Lifting the sanctions, however, would tighten the regime's grip on the Iranian people and provide a boost to its destabilizing operations across the Middle East. Biden must consider these issues before making a decision on rejoining the 2015 nuclear deal.

In 2018, President Donald Trump announced that the US was withdrawing from the 2015 JCPOA nuclear deal with the Islamic regime in Iran and reintroducing strict sanctions on the regime. Now that Trump has left the scene and Joe Biden has been installed in the White House, there is a new possibility that the US will lift those sanctions.

When President Barack Obama negotiated the JCPOA with the Islamic regime, his VP was Joe Biden. Resuscitating the nuclear deal is thus one of Biden's foremost foreign policy ambitions. In an op-ed published by CNN on September 13, 2020, he [wrote](#) that the US would rejoin the JCPOA "if Iran returns to strict compliance with the nuclear deal." On January 22, 2021, the regime's FM, Muhammad Javad Zarif, responded that the [Islamic regime in Iran is also prepared to rejoin](#) the deal.

Before making any decisions, President Biden must consider the negative effects of the deal on the Iranian people and the stability of the Middle East.

### Criticism of the sanctions

When US sanctions were reintroduced in 2018, many commentators criticized the move and encouraged Washington to deal with the regime instead. Peter Beinart [wrote](#), "Sanctions don't just help despotic regimes tighten their grip. They erode the habits and capacities necessary to sustain liberal democracy

over the long term.” Jason Rezaian, writing at the *Washington Post*, [claimed](#), “When people are squeezed economically, their needs and aspirations become much more about survival than about working toward change.”

Referencing the economic challenges faced by Iran amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Mohsen Tavakol at the Atlantic Council [wrote](#), “Whatever sanctions on Iran were intended to accomplish, they will always directly make ordinary people pay the heaviest price.” Former regime ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian made similar statements in an [article](#) for Aljazeera, writing that the coronavirus has “made the inhumane and unjust sanctions the US has imposed on Iran deadlier than ever.”

The sanctions were also criticized for not being able to stop the regime’s nuclear program. *Foreign Policy*’s Colum Lynch [reported](#) in May 2020 that the Islamic regime, two years after the reintroduction of the sanctions, had halved “the time it would need to produce enough weapons-grade fuel to build a nuclear bomb.” Eric Brewer at the Center for Strategic and International Studies made a similar point, [writing](#) that a deal with the regime “presents the best chance of preventing an Iranian bomb.”

These claims are totally misconceived, as they are based on two invalid and misleading assumptions about the Iranian regime.

**Assumption 1: The Iranian regime is benevolent toward the people it rules, and trade with the regime will result in a growing economy that would benefit the people and promote democracy**

This assumption depends on a gross misrepresentation of the Iranian regime. The regime is totalitarian and has no regard for the welfare of the Iranian people.

The view also hinges on the idea that international trade promotes democracy, a premise I [disproved](#) in the case of Iran (from 1980 to 2006) in a Swedish research article from 2010.

International trade promotes democracy *only when the wealth generated by trade benefits the people and contributes to a growing independent middle class*. This has not happened in Iran since the revolutionary regime took over in 1979.

While Iran’s purchasing power parity-adjusted gross national income per capita [doubled](#) between 1990 and 2017 (prior to the reintroduction of US sanctions in 2018), Iranians suffered [widespread poverty](#) during the period. Nor was there any significant indication of liberalization or democratization in the country. On the contrary: Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his entourage used and continue to use repressive measures against the people on matters both public and private.

The incumbents have [deliberately hindered](#) the emergence of an independent middle class by extending their control over the economy. The resource distribution policy of the Islamic regime has resulted in the elite growing ever richer while talented citizens leave the country. Corruption, lack of rule of law, lack of transparency, and lack of will has impeded any attempt at economic and political reform. Millions of Iranians have become dependent on the regime for employment and the ability to sustain their families. Protesting against the regime will result in losing one's job at best; at worst, it can result in being tortured and executed, as in the case of the young wrestler [Navid Afkari](#).

It is also incorrect to claim that the sanctions prevented humanitarian aid from reaching Iran amid the spread of COVID-19. Humanitarian aid to Iran was exempted from the sanctions, and in March 2020 the US offered to help Iran fight the pandemic—an offer [rejected by Khamenei](#). More recently, Khamenei [banned](#) the import of COVID-19 vaccines from the US and the UK and called French vaccines unreliable. He did this despite the catastrophic outcome of the pandemic in Iran, which, according to official data, has suffered [more than 57,000 deaths](#). The [real death toll](#) is believed to be much higher.

The Islamic regime's response to the COVID-19 virus has been too little too late. Alireza Zali, head of the COVID-19 task force in Tehran, [warns](#) that Iran will soon suffer a fourth wave of the coronavirus. Had the regime reacted sooner, been transparent about the virus, followed the recommendations of health experts, prohibited [religious ceremonies](#), and seriously fought [drug smuggling](#), the pandemic would not have hit Iran as severely as it has.

It is true that the sanctions made it difficult for banks to process financial aid transactions between Iran and other foreign nations, but blame for this should not be placed on the sanctions. The Islamic regime has long used its financial institutions for money laundering, embezzlement, and the sponsoring of terrorism, which has discouraged the world community from working with banks in Iran—especially when sanctions require closer scrutiny of the transactions. It was the inhumane actions of the Islamic regime, not the sanctions, that prevented humanitarian aid from reaching Iran.

### **Assumption 2: The Islamic regime is reliable and can be trusted**

According to this way of thinking, if the JCPOA is brought back to life the regime will commit to its promises to refrain from producing a nuclear bomb and will respect international law. This assumption is both false and extremely naïve.

History has proven time and again that the Islamic regime in Iran cannot be trusted. It maintained a nuclear program in secret for years before it was exposed in 2002 by an opposition group. After that, the US and the EU (in various forms and constellations) made multiple attempts to get the regime to abandon its nuclear program, and several agreements were made. Every time, the regime [took advantage of or violated those agreements](#).

After 10 years of unsuccessful efforts to find a diplomatic solution, the EU joined the US in 2012 and levied severe international sanctions on the Iranian regime. In 2015, the nuclear deal between Iran and P5+1 was signed and the sanctions were lifted—but the regime [violated the deal](#) and continued with its nuclear activities, its destabilization of the Middle East, and its violations of human rights in Iran.

Consider one further example of the untrustworthiness of the Iranian government: in January 2020, the regime shot down Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 and for a long time refused to accept any responsibility for the crime.

To all this should be added that trade with the regime will directly assist its efforts to strengthen its military and intelligence capabilities. This would not only have negative ramifications for the regime's opposition and democracy promotion in Iran but would also have grave implications for prospects for peace and stability in the Middle East.

One of the first things students of political science learn is that economic power can swiftly be transformed into political and military power. Trading with Iran thus helps the regime strengthen and develop its repressive intelligence apparatus as well as its military capabilities both at home and abroad. Sanctions, on the other hand, force the regime to reduce its defense budget, as shown by the [US Institute of Peace](#) and by [Sajjad F. Dizaji and Mohammad R. Farzanegan](#).

The regime's destabilizing actions in the Middle East, which have continued despite the sanctions, are well known and well documented. Surely, with the economic and political leeway the nuclear deal (or similar deals) would provide the regime, its operations in the region will increase in number and grow more complex and disruptive. It will also help the regime invest more on its pursuit of a nuclear bomb. If the Islamic regime was able to halve the time it would need to produce enough weapons-grade fuel for a nuclear bomb even with the sanctions in place, imagine what it will be able to do once the sanctions are lifted.

**Biden must decide whom he supports in Iran**

The regime's suppression of democracy and disrespect for other countries' sovereignty has placed the Iranian people in a perpetual state of economic crisis, and now also a severe health crisis. The sanctions cannot and should not be blamed for the arbitrariness and indifference of the regime. For more than 40 years, the country's Islamic rulers have deliberately ignored the needs of the Iranian people, and trade and political relations have neither changed their behavior nor promoted democracy in Iran.

In addition, considering the regime's lack of transparency, support for terrorism, corruption, and human rights violations, it is undeniable that lifting the sanctions will not improve the lives of ordinary Iranians. Trade with the regime would instead delay their attempts to oust the tyrants, thereby prolonging the suffering of the Iranian people.

It is true that the sanctions and Trump's maximum pressure policy did not change the regime's behavior, but it must be noted that real sanctions were introduced against the regime from mid-2012 to January 2016 and then again from November 2018. Over the course of the regime's 41-year totalitarian reign, it has been exposed to serious sanctions for a total of around six years.

In other words, the regime has had the opportunity to trade almost freely with the world for more than 35 years with no change in its behavior—clear evidence that trade and diplomatic relations with the Islamic government do not work. Sanctions, on the other hand, if given more time, can have a real impact. A few years of sanctions forced the regime to decrease its defense budget. A longer period of sanctions could bring it to its knees.

Economic sanctions would force the regime to spend less on intelligence and security forces and curtail its opportunities to buy equipment for surveillance and repression. This would strengthen the Iranian people and give them a real chance of ridding themselves of their oppressors by their own hands and according to their own will.

At this crucial moment, when all eyes are on Washington, Joe Biden must make an important decision. Whom will he support—Iran's people or Iran's tyrants? Will the sanctions be lifted and the regime permitted to continue to violate human rights and international law, thus continuing to pose a threat to the free world, or will the sanctions remain in place to show tyrants all over the world that the US stands by humanitarian and democratic values?

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