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Iran After Trump: Can Biden Revive the Nuclear Deal and Does Iran Even Want to?

Hadi Kahalzadeh

During his election campaign, U.S. president Joseph R. Biden, Jr., promised that he would reverse the Trump administration's Iran policy and revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the so-called nuclear deal, with Tehran. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, welcomed Biden's position, announcing that Iran would return to full compliance with the nuclear deal once sanctions were completely lifted.[1] Yet restoring this deal has proven unexpectedly difficult, causing Washington to doubt Tehran's sincerity. In particular, Iran's vacillation regarding resuming indirect negotiations with the U.S. might suggest either that Tehran has lost interest in the accord, or that it was tactically stalling as a way to win more concessions prior to the new round of talks that began in Vienna in November 2021.

Against such suppositions, this Brief argues that the problem is neither Iran's capriciousness nor its keen bargaining skills. Instead, one of the unacknowledged causes of present difficulties is the legacy of the "maximum pressure" Iran policy previously adopted by former U.S. president Donald Trump.[2] Not only does the memory of maximum pressure still loom large in the minds of policymakers in Iran, but, just as importantly, its material impact has fundamentally changed Iran's political landscape. The expanded sanctions regime implemented under President Trump has had adverse consequences for the Iranian middle classes—perhaps the most natural U.S. allies in the country—causing them to lose faith in the reformist politicians who supported a new round of diplomacy. Iranian hardliners invoked the U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal to show that they had been right all along to dismiss the negotiations as a sham. As European and other international companies began to withdraw from Iran out of fear of being targeted as sanctions-busters, the hardliners opened the door to Chinese investors and called on their own loyal business interests to fill the vacuum. And as poverty worsened yet further under the U.S. sanctions, the hardliners trumpeted how their own charitable organizations were working hard to meet the needs of Iran's poorest citizens. President Trump's insistence on imposing crippling sanctions on Iran has consolidated the hardliners' hold on Iranian politics and undermined any willingness to compromise.

In addition, technical modifications made to the sanctions regime under Trump have left a messy tangle of law and bureaucracy to which this and subsequent U.S. administrations will need to devote significant time, energy, and human resources to untangle. As this Brief will argue, the assorted legacies of Trump's Iran policy will make it all but impossible for the Biden administration to turn back the clock and restore the status quo ante.

From Nuclear Deal to Maximum Pressure

The landmark Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of 2015 saw Iran accept significant restrictions on its nuclear program in exchange for suspension of the broad economic sanctions that had been imposed by the U.S. and the United Nations Security Council after 2010. The JCPOA was built upon cooperation between the U.S. and its traditional allies on the other side of the Atlantic, on the one hand, and its antagonists—Russia, China, and Iran itself—on the other, in order to resolve diplomatically what the U.S. had long considered to be a global security issue. Colloquially known as the Iran nuclear deal, the JCPOA was one of President Obama's most significant foreign policy legacies.

Everything changed in 2018, when President Trump officially pulled the U.S. out of the deal and abruptly launched what was described as a campaign of "maximum pressure" intended to definitively put an end to Iran's nuclear aspirations. The stated objective of President Trump's policy was to force Iran back to the bargaining table to renegotiate the JCPOA with even stricter restrictions on its nuclear and missile programs. The unstated objective, endorsed by senior Trump officials such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton, was to impose harsher economic sanctions so as to provoke the Iranian people to rise up against the Islamic Republic.[3] In the end, Trump's policy was unsuccessful either in pressuring Iran to renegotiate the JCPOA or in inspiring a middle-class revolution against the Islamic Republic. Instead, Iran rejected any renegotiation of the deal—and then, after a year of continued compliance, retaliated against the U.S. withdrawal by gradually exceeding JCPOA limits on its nuclear activities. Significantly, Iran advanced its research and development of more advanced and powerful centrifuge models: It installed a chain of IR-6 centrifuges, and tested its most advanced centrifuge, the IR-9—fifty times more capable than the IR-1 generation allowed under the JCPOA. Rebuilding its enriched uranium stocks to twelve times the amount permitted under the JCPOA, Iran likewise increased the level of uranium enrichment beyond the permitted 3.5% purity to first 20% and then 63%. All these steps contravened the terms of the JCPOA; but in the eyes of Iran's leaders, Trump's maximum pressure policy had provided it with a pretext to recommence its nuclear program

Hadi Kahalzadeh is a doctoral fellow at the Crown Center and PhD candidate in social policy at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis.

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and a means to increase the cost of imposing sanctions for the United States in the future.

U.S. Economic Sanctions on Iran: An Overview

From 1979 to today, Washington has continuously imposed economic sanctions on Tehran in response to its concerns about military, nuclear, and human rights issues. The amount of sanctions imposed by the Trump administration, however, and the damage inflicted on the Iranian economy by those sanctions, is of an order of magnitude greater than any in the past.

The history of U.S. sanctions on Iran can be divided into three stages. The first began after the November 1979 hostage crisis, when the U.S. severed diplomatic relations, froze nearly all Iranian assets held in the U.S., and imposed a trade embargo. After 2003, U.S. sanctions mainly targeted Iran's nuclear program and military capabilities. These sanctions, however, were mostly "primary" sanctions: That is, they prohibited U.S. companies and individuals from dealing with Iran, but did not impact entities outside the U.S. Similarly, Washington's sanctions excluded Iran from the U.S. banking and energy sectors, but did not impede Iran's access to the broader global market. Tehran suffered from missed opportunities but did not pay any significant economic cost.

The second phase of sanctions started after ongoing nuclear negotiations came to a standstill. Between 2006 and 2009, Iran rejected six UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions related to its nuclear program. Talks on Tehran's research reactor fuel swap between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UNSC plus Germany) then ground to a halt in October 2009.[4] Inside the country, the Islamic Republic was challenged by its largest-ever protests since the 1979 revolution, which questioned the legitimacy of the 2009 election that saw Mahmoud Ahmadinejad become president. This uprising, known as the Green Movement, lasted until February 2011 and undermined President Ahmadinejad's credibility as one who could deliver a diplomatic agreement. For its part, the U.S. interpreted the protests as evidence of the overall precariousness of the Iranian regime—which, it believed, would find it difficult to conclude a deal with so many protesters in the streets. At the same time, the Obama administration was facing unprecedented pressure from the U.S. Congress to impose further sanctions on Iran. By the end of 2009, President Obama had authorized the State Department to begin constructing a new sanctions strategy.

This initiative soon bore fruit. In June 2010, the U.S supported UNSC Resolution 1929, which imposed a new inspection system on Iranian transportation, shipping, and banking. In July, President Obama signed the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA), which applied secondary sanctions to Iran. Unlike primary sanctions, according to which a U.S. person or entity is prohibited from working with a sanctioned country, secondary sanctions punish non-U.S. persons or companies who do business with a sanctioned country.

Eighteen months later, in December 2011, President Obama expanded the secondary sanctions to encompass Iran's Central Bank and its oil sector. This was the first time that the U.S. had targeted non-U.S. financial institutions that worked with Iran's Central Bank. In January 2012, the European Union (EU) joined the U.S. sanctions on Iran's oil industry, and it terminated Iran's access to the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT)—the global messaging system for banking transfers—thereby severing Iran's international financial connections.

This second phase of sanctions, from 2010 to 2015, coincided with a period of severe economic difficulty for Iran. The first two years of Obama sanctions saw Iranian economic growth fall by 7.6%, inflation surge to 65%,[5] and crude oil exports decrease by as much as 50%.[6] Iran's economy contracted by 17%.[7]

This stage of sanctions remained in effect until the 2015 nuclear deal, when Iran accepted constraints on its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. Having agreed to monitoring and verification by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran reduced the number of its centrifuges by about two-thirds, reduced its uranium enrichment capacity back to the permitted amount, and decreased its stockpile of enriched uranium by 98%.

The deal opened a window of economic opportunity for Iran. Between $50 and $56 billion of Iran's foreign reserves were released;[8] its economy grew by 17%; 3.5 million jobs were created; and overall poverty decreased in 2016 and again in 2017.[9] The administration of Hassan Rouhani, however, failed to distribute the benefits of the deal equally among different segments of Iranian society: Residents of Tehran, compared with rural areas and small towns, benefited most from the deal.[10]

The third phase of sanctions began on May 8, 2018, when President Trump officially ended U.S. participation in the JCPOA and imposed new sanctions on Iran. The sheer number of these sanctions dramatically exceeded those in place before the maximum pressure campaign. My analysis of data from the U.S. Office of Foreign Assets Control show that sanctions on Tehran tripled—from 370 under Obama to over 1,500 under Trump[11]—making Iran the most sanctioned nation in the world.[12]

The Trump administration also strengthened the existing sanctions regime. It first reimposed all sanctions which had been lifted by the JCPOA, reclassified a number of these sanctions, and then placed 1,139 new entities or individuals under sanctions for the first time. It also used legal and bureaucratic processes to create a tangle of red tape. For example, a person or organization that had earlier been tagged under Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation (NPWMD) might now find itself relisted with the Iranian Financial Sanctions Regulations (IFSR) tag. Other cases were now labeled with two or even three tags at a time. Many cases on the primary sanctions list from 2011 to 2015 now suddenly appeared on the list of Specially Designated Nationals, and were thus subject to more secondary sanctions. Under this approach, different categories of sanctions, such as those related to Iran's armed forces or support of terrorism, were bundled together with the nuclear issue. The ensuing paperwork would need to be unraveled in any future efforts to restore the JCPOA.

The technical and bureaucratic complications that would necessarily be involved in relaunching the Iran deal fueled doubt in Tehran that the deal would ever be restored in its entirety. Later, when the Biden administration announced that the U.S. could "quickly lift all sanctions inconsistent with the JCPOA,"[13] Iran concluded that numerous sanctions Trump had reclassified as 'non-nuclear' would be unaffected. Iran therefore insisted on lifting all sanctions imposed under the maximum pressure campaign. However, the Biden Administration was unwilling to repeal all non-nuclear sanctions imposed by the Trump Administration, which it considered beyond the scope of the nuclear deal. Additionally, Iran concluded that the U.S. would find it all but impossible to fulfill its commitment under the JCPOA to end all nuclear sanctions on October 2023, which is known as "Transaction Day." This prospect inevitably makes reviving the JCPOA less appealing for Iran.

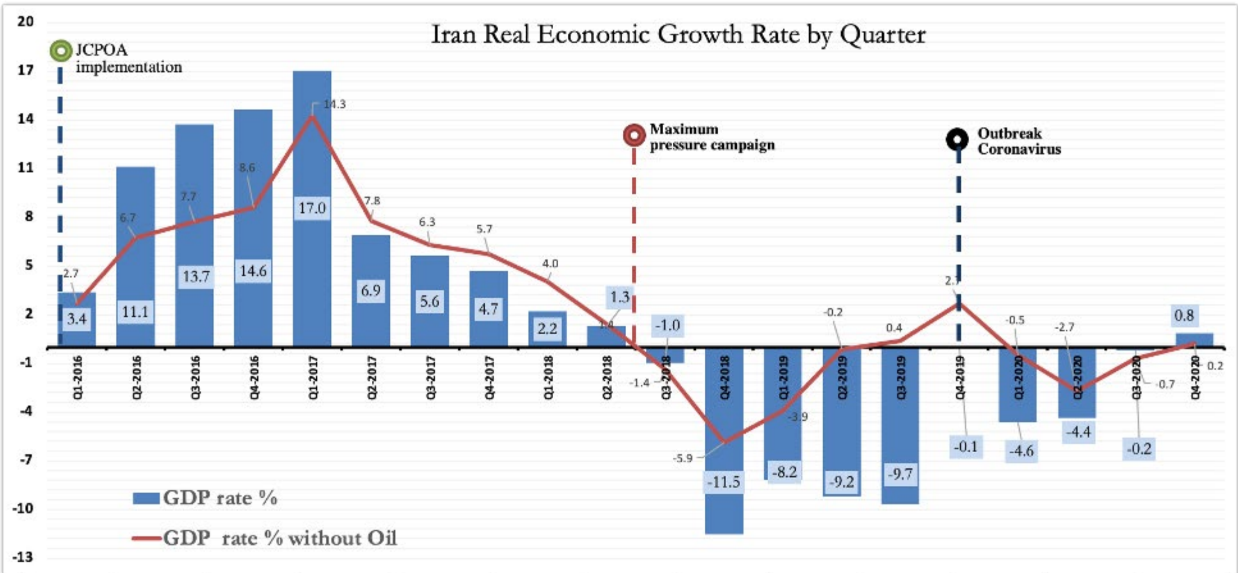
Trump's Sanctions and Iran's Economic Decline

The Trump administration's sanctions were far-reaching: They targeted almost all Iran's industry, including oil, and part of the service sector, including banking, insurance, and financial services. The financial implications were severe: Sanctions terminated the country's access to its own assets and reserves overseas and impacted its access to hard currency as well. In August 2018, the U.S. banned Iran from purchasing U.S. dollars and prohibited third parties from selling dollars to Iran. Sanctions also restricted third parties from engaging in transactions using Iran's currency, the rial. Iran's Central Bank was designated as a foreign terrorist organization.

Not surprisingly, Iran's economy reacted strongly to these sanctions. The available data illustrate that the economy shrank by 11.5% in the fourth quarter of 2018 and by an additional 8.2% in the first quarter of 2019. Oil, mining, and industry were particularly heavily hit. The economic data from mid-2018 to early 2020 (that is, from the imposition of sanctions to the outbreak of the global pandemic) show the economy contracting by 13%, and real per capita income dropping by 14%. By March 2019, Iran's oil exports had dropped 80% as compared with the previous year, from 2.5 million barrels per day (mbd) to under 0.3 mbd.

Oil income fell from $42.2 billion in 2018 to just $13.75 billion in 2019. And though Iran's foreign reserves after the JCPOA stood at $115 billion in 2017, by 2019, sanctions had shrunk these reserves to $85 billion. As a result of the sharp decline in export revenues and hard currency reserves, the national currency lost 65% of its value between 2018 and 2019 alone, and inflation reached 75%. On the supply side of the economy, average production costs for Iranian manufacturers increased by 71%. Thus, sanctions both seriously weakened the country's balance of payments and exacerbated stagflation: high inflation combined with high unemployment and a deep economic downturn.

Figure 1: Iran's quarterly economic growth rate winter 2016 to fall 2020



Source: Author's analysis based on data reported by Iran Statistical Center. The quarterly economic growth rate reflects the change in real GDP between a given quarter and the same period last year, not the change relative to the previous quarter.

The sharp declines in national revenues saw Iran facing a fiscal deficit amounting to 40–45% of the national budget—the highest since the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. Faced with this public budget deficit, Iranian policymakers prioritized paying the salaries of government employees rather than investing in infrastructure or paying off the country's debts to the private sector. Many private contractors went bankrupt owing to these unpaid state debts—and as one of the driving forces of Iran's private sector, these contractors were responsible for creating about a quarter of the employment opportunities in Iran's job market.

From a political standpoint, private contractors had been one of the primary funders of reformists' electoral campaigns over the last two decades. Consequently, though a number of top private contractors went bankrupt, contractors affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—such as Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters and Jahad-e Nasr Institute—were able to take their place in the market. Taking road construction as an example, when thirteen of the fourteen leading private road builders declared bankruptcy in 2019–2020,[14] they left room for the IRGC-leaning Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters to double the number of its road construction projects over the same period.[15]

Despite the dramatic impact of sanctions, however, Iran's economy showed a modest recovery in the two quarters immediately prior to the coronavirus pandemic. In summer 2019, the quarterly growth rate in non-oil sectors reached 0.4%; in the fall, it reached 2.7%. This modest recovery was rooted in the fact that the economy had gradually become more diversified and self-reliant over the long course of sanctions. Manufacturing was also helped by currency depreciation, which made domestic products more competitive than imports; this allowed domestic manufacturers to increase their market share and avoid laying off some of their workforce. In addition, Iran's restricted ability to export oil led the country to increase its domestic manufacturing capacity to process its own crude into petrochemical and petroleum products and export them to its neighbors instead. As a result, though Iran's oil revenues dropped by 83% under sanctions (from $48.2 billion in 2017 to around $8 billion in 2020), non-oil exports dropped by only 25% (from $46.9 billion in 2017 to $35 billion in 2020). New non-oil exports (including petrochemical and petroleum products), along with decreased demand for imports, covered part of Iran's hard currency shortfall. And to replace export markets lost as a result of sanctions, Iran increasingly turned to a smaller number of countries, especially Iraq, Afghanistan, China, Turkey, and the UAE.

The International Monetary Fund estimated that Iran's real annual economic growth rate reached 3.4% in 2020 and projected a rate of 2.5% in 2021, even under the impact of sanctions and the pandemic.[16] So by diversifying its economy and expanding economic ties with its neighbors, the Islamic Republic has managed to avoid economic collapse.[17]

This economic resurgence is seen by Iranian conservatives as evidence that the country has transitioned into what they call a "resistance economy." Arguing that the country is more resilient than ever in the face of foreign economic coercion, newly empowered conservatives argue that resistance, not diplomatic engagement, will solve Iran's economic woes.

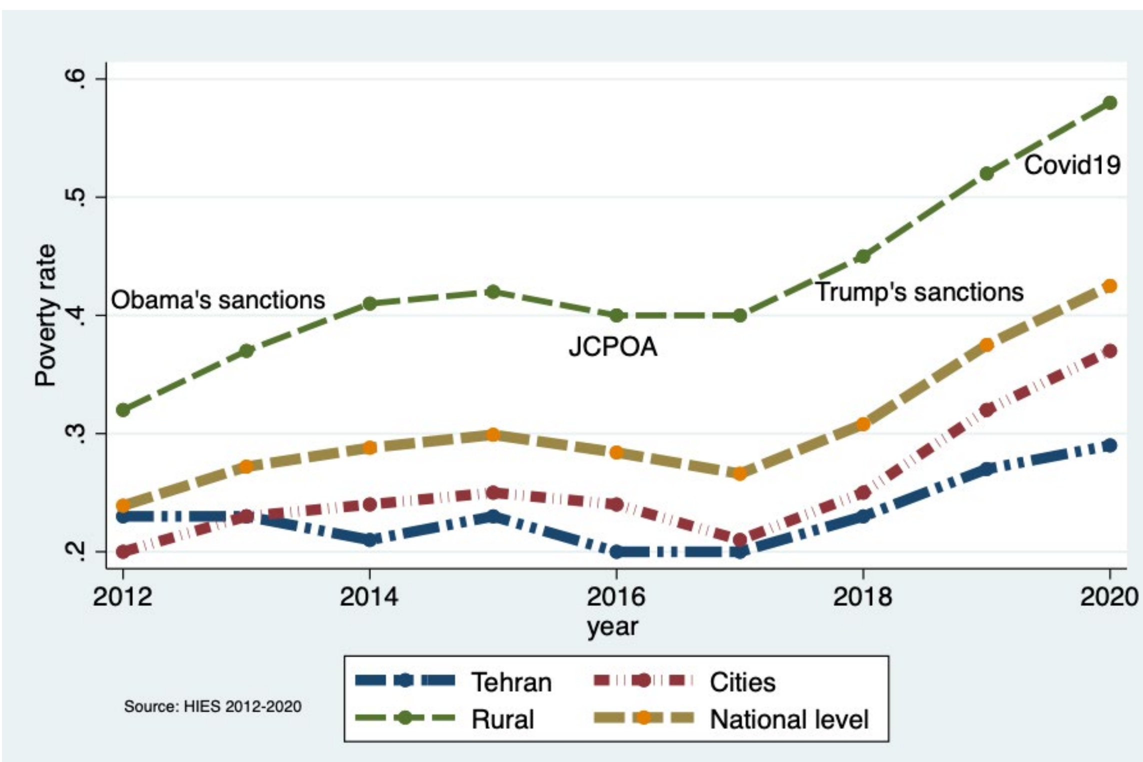
Economic Hardship in Iran: Why It Works to the Advantage of Hardliners

Even as hardliners were winning the battle of ideas regarding the benefits of negotiations, they cleverly expanded their constituencies of support by providing social services to those Iranians who blamed their worsening economic situation on the reimposition of sanctions under President Trump. Analysis of the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES)[18], administrated by the Iran Statistical Center, showed an increase in overall poverty, especially in rural areas—and a significant portion of the Iranian middle class also slid into poverty during this period.

During the first two years of the new Trump sanctions, my analysis of data from the HIES shows that the national poverty rate increased by 11%, and the average living standard dropped by 12%.[19] Between March 2018 and March 2021 (including the first year of the pandemic), the poverty rate increased by 14.3%, and the average living standard dropped by 14%. At the end of March 2018, the number of poor people in Iran—defined as those who could not afford to meet their basic needs—was 19.1 million.[20] By March 2020, this number had reached 28.7 million; one year later, it stood at 32.3 million. Over 13 million people had been plunged into poverty in just three years.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the new poverty was unevenly distributed among different segments of society: Women, and those living in small towns and villages, have been more vulnerable than others. My analysis of HIES data shows that the overall proportion of female-headed households in Iran is 14%, but in 2017, women headed 36% of poor households; by 2021, this figure had increased to 50%. Over the last three years, the poverty rate in rural areas increased from 40% to 58%, whereas Tehran's poverty rate increased from 20% to 29% (see Figure 2).[21]

Figure 2: Iran poverty headcount ratio, 2012–2020



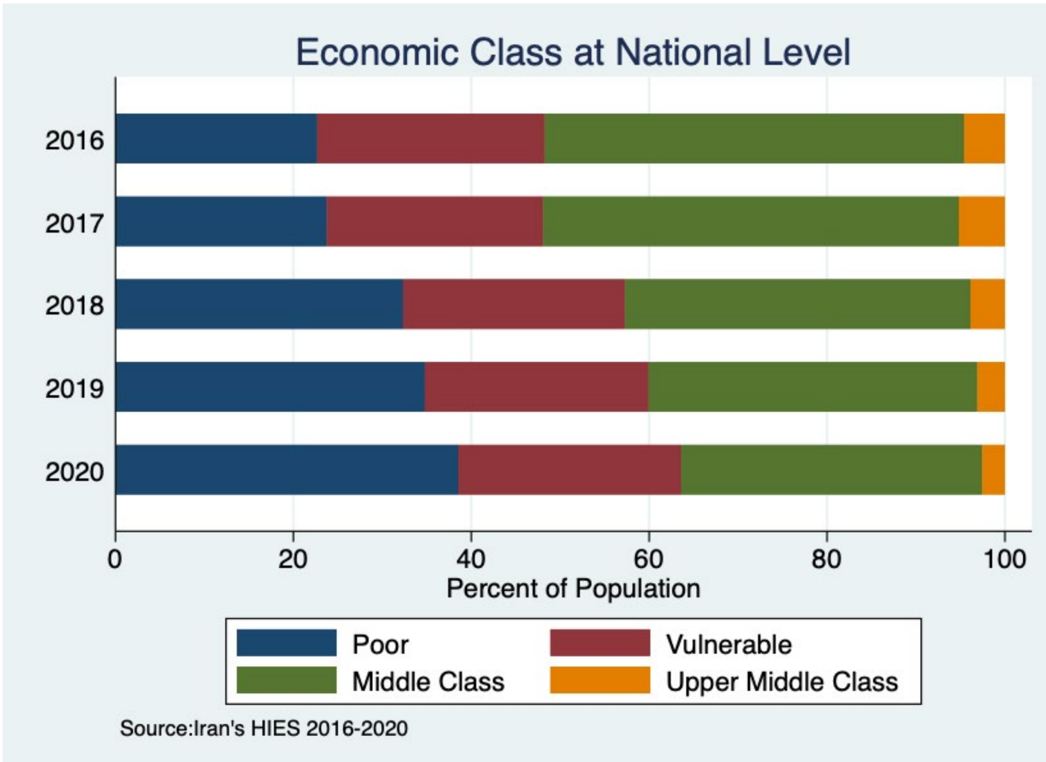
Source: Author's analysis based on Iran's Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES)

Analysis of HIES data also reveals changes for other income groups in Iran over the same period. Though the meaning of class is always hotly contested, one approach commonly used by economists focuses on expenditures.[22] HIES classifies households with spending between 150% and 500% of the poverty line as "middle class"; households with spending above

500% of the national poverty line are identified as "upper middle class." In contrast, households whose spending is above the poverty line but under 150% of the national poverty line are classified as vulnerable populations.

HIES data show that around 48% of Iranian households could be considered middle class by this definition in 2016 and 2017 (Figure 3). By March 2020, that proportion had decreased to 37%; by March 2021, it had declined to 34%.

Figure 3: Iran economic class structure (2016–2020)



Source: Author's analysis based on Iran's Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES)

The impact of lower household incomes is especially visible in spending patterns. Prior to the reimposition of sanctions, 27% of Iranians were food-insecure (defined as unable to meet their essential daily nutritional requirement of 2,100 calories). Analyzing data from HIES reveals that 40% of Iranians were food-insecure after the first two years of sanctions; by March 2021, a year after the pandemic outbreak, this number stood at 60%. In just three years, Iran's food-insecure population increased from 22 million to over 50 million people.

Between March 2018 and March 2021, real average household spending shrunk by 30%: Iranian families spent 40% less on education and 50% less on entertainment. These figures are not altogether surprising: The decline in the value of the rial meant that the purchasing power of a minimum wage income dropped from $260 to almost $110 per month, the cost of a 2,100-calorie food basket increased by a factor of 3.2, and the national currency lost almost one-quarter of its value.[23]

Meanwhile, public spending on social welfare has declined, while defense and security spending has increased.[24] Conservative hardliners, such as those in the IRGC, have seized this opportunity to make themselves socially indispensable. In cooperation with economic foundations affiliated with Ayatollah Khamenei's office, the IRGC launched an "empathy and kindness campaign" to distribute millions of food packages in disadvantaged areas. A charitable organization controlled by hardliners, the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, doubled its aid recipients suffering from economic hardship in the last year.[25] This organization provides multiple forms of aid, including cash transfers and health insurance, to Iran's poorest populations.

Simultaneously, the IRGC has suppressed independent civil society organizations working on poverty relief and social protection, such as Imam Ali's Popular Students Relief Society.[26] Hardliners argued that Rouhani's administration was incapable of alleviating poverty and economic hardship: Somewhat disingenuously, they undermined Rouhani's administration by arguing that Rouhani was wasting time and energy negotiating a nuclear deal with foreign powers instead of addressing poverty at home.

It is true, however, that Rouhani raised public expectations about the likely positive economic impact of the nuclear deal and then failed to distribute the benefits of the deal across Iranian society.[27] Most of the jobs created after the JCPOA were in large cities; poverty levels and unemployment remained much the same as before in small towns and villages. The unequal payoffs from the 2015 nuclear deal, along with rising poverty levels under the Trump sanctions, have discouraged the lower strata of Iranian society from believing that diplomacy and engagement might provide a remedy for their economic pain.

The Consequences of Maximum Pressure: Away from the U.S., Toward Hardliners and China

Trump's maximum pressure policy significantly bolstered conservative hardliners in Iran and undermined the position of moderate reformists. The reformist President Khatami (1997–2005) had sought dialogue with the West, a stance also adopted by President Rouhani when he ran for office in 2013. The central assumption underlying the reformists' approach was that U.S. sanctions were a temporary problem that would be resolved through diplomacy with the West. They argued that a dialogue with the U.S. leading to agreement over the nuclear program would end Iran's international isolation; in return, they believed, the West would offer technology and capital that Iran needed.

In contrast, conservative hardliners argued that the correct response to U.S. pressure should be resistance, not diplomacy—reflecting the conviction of Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, that the West (and especially the U.S.) was not a trustworthy partner. In the hardliners' view, compromise with the West was a naive approach that would not end Iran's isolation or its economic problems. They maintained that the U.S. would employ new pretexts to reimpose sanctions even if Iran made concessions on nuclear issues. Instead of tying the country's fate to decisions made in Washington, the hardliners advocated that Iran learn how to live under the continuing threat of sanctions and build its own economic resilience. China, in particular, was proposed to replace the West as a source of technology and capital.

The idea of engagement and diplomacy with the West was once popular with many Iranians, but it has recently lost support among the wider public—especially among the lower strata of society, who received few tangible benefits from the 2015 Iran deal. Not surprisingly, hardliners capitalized on this discontent to sweep to victory in both the 2019 parliamentary and 2021 presidential elections. In 2019, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, a former brigadier general in the IRGC, became the Speaker of Parliament, while 65% of the parliamentary seats went to candidates affiliated with the IRGC. In total, at least twenty-four IRGC commanders were elected to the Parliament.[28] As for the presidency, Ebrahim Raisi, a profoundly conservative former head of the judiciary, won the 2021 election with just 30% of all eligible voters. Twenty out of thirty members of his cabinet are either former members or current affiliates of the IRGC, and twelve appear by name as targets of U.S. or EU sanctions. The victory of the hardliners followed the lowest recorded turnout since the Iranian Revolution, suggesting that reform-minded voters failed to turn out to support their candidates.[29]

From a foreign policy standpoint, the maximum pressure policy pushed Iran eastward. Although China was interested in building its relationship with Iran after the implementation of JCPOA in 2015, President Rouhani's government still preferred to work with the West. Despite many offers of cooperation from Chinese firms, Rouhani's government opted for European companies, such as Peugeot, Citroën, Renault, and Total, to invest in Iran's car manufacturing and oil industries, for example. But these European companies abandoned the country immediately after Trump's sanctions.[30]

The EU's inability to uphold its commitments, and its failure to maintain the JCPOA after the U.S. withdrawal, created a widespread belief in Iran that economic sanctions would never end—and consequently, looking westward no longer seemed like a viable option. As Ayatollah Khamenei commented in 2018, "We should look East, not West. Pinning our hope on the West or Europe would belittle us as we would beg them for a favor, and they would do nothing."[31] From this perspective, China is an emerging global superpower in competition with the U.S. and poses no ideological conflict vis-à-vis Iran, expresses no putative concern for human rights, and has no desire to interfere in Iran's internal affairs. Indeed, the maximum pressure policy created room for Iranian conservatives to easily disregard one of the most important slogans of the 1979 Islamic Revolution—"Neither East nor West"—and advocate wholeheartedly for reorienting Iran toward China.

Conclusion

President Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA changed the playing field for domestic and foreign policymaking in Iran. Trump's maximum pressure policy neither prompted a new nuclear deal nor provoked the Iranian people to rise up against the Islamic Republic. Rather, it fostered the belief that Trump's approach was the rule rather than the exception when it came to the United States: Coercion, not diplomacy, seemed to be Washington's preferred policy instrument when it came to Tehran. For hardliners, engagement could never remedy Iran's economic woes nor produce an effective resolution of the country's disputes with the West.

Iran resisted renegotiating the nuclear deal in response to the maximum pressure campaign and, after one year of continued compliance, instead reinvigorated its nuclear program. And the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran deal was a boon to hardliners seeking to expand their support base. The new sanctions crippled Iran's middle class and pushed a significant part of Iranian society into poverty, which helped hardline organizations like the IRGC gain popularity, especially among the poor; the IRGC also expanded its economic influence throughout the country, especially in rural areas and small towns. At the same time, IRGC-affiliated companies expanded their economic activities, particularly in oil, services, and construction, and maneuvered many private enterprises out of the market.

The Trump administration's maximum pressure policy, then, failed either to force Iran back to the negotiating table or to inspire enough popular discontent to shake the foundations of the Islamic Republic. Instead, enhanced U.S. sanctions have played into the hands of the hardliners, allowing them to entrench their position in Iranian politics, to continue militarizing the country's economy, and to steer Iran's foreign policy ever eastward, farther and farther away from the West. Though Iran's hardliners may portray Biden's Iran strategy as being little different from that of his predecessor, it is actually the legacy of Trump's maximum pressure policy—which has boxed in Biden's strategy vis-à-vis Iran—that is making any progress with respect to the nuclear deal difficult.

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