

What do the new U.S. sanctions mean for Iran? Experts respond

By: Kourosh Ziabari
Journalist and Reporter

In May 2018, the U.S. President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal. This was the fulfilment of a promise he had made during the presidential campaign season and frustrated the other parties to the agreement, who saw Trump's move as detrimental to the fate of an accord that was the outcome of months of engaged diplomacy. Iran deal was endorsed by the UN Security Council through the resolution 2231, stipulating specific limitations on Iran's nuclear program in return for the removal of the nuclear-related sanctions that Iran was penalized with for several years.

The U.S. President reinstated all the sanctions that were lifted as part of the JCPOA, claiming that withdrawal from the Iran deal would make America safer. The Trump administration officials made it clear that the ultimate goal is to bring Iran's oil exports to zero and decapitate the oil-rich nation's economy. The unilateral de-certification of the JCPOA by the United States and the introduction of new economic sanctions in August and November last year marked a new low in the course of Iran-U.S. relations and undid all the achievements that were made during President Obama's tenure to bridge the gaps between Washington and Tehran through negotiations and détente.

The introduction of new sanctions on Iran also gave rise to concerns that the Iranian people will have to brace for more difficult days and months as their country is once again targeted by stringent punitive measures and their livelihoods are going to be affected direly. The humanitarian consequences and impacts of the sanctions are perhaps the most neglected side of President Trump's aggressive Iran policy.

In 2018, Organization for Defending Victims of Violence conducted interviews

with several academicians and public policy experts to gauge their views on the withdrawal of the United States from the Iran deal and the enforcement of new sanctions against the Middle East nation. In these interviews, the experts shared their opinions about the human impact of the sanctions, the legality of the sanctions and the reasons why the United States withdrew from the JCPOA.

The most important excerpts from these interviews are selected, which can be found below.

Dr. Edward Wastnidge, Lecturer in Politics and International Studies at the Open University, UK

- The US withdrawal from the JCPOA was a short-sighted, political move made by a president utterly unequipped for the realities of managing U.S. foreign policy. It shows that the current U.S. administration does not care for internationally recognized agreements, or the views of its allies. The Islamic Republic of Iran has every right to possess a peaceful, civilian nuclear program, and yet it still allowed one of the most rigorous inspection regimes and restrictions on its nuclear program to demonstrate its commitment to international norms in this area.
- The humanitarian consequences of such actions are the saddest outcome of the decision to reimpose punitive sanctions on Iran. This can be seen in the difficulties that ordinary Iranians face in accessing certain medicines for example. Also, the wider sanctions targeting Iran's oil exports also have a potentially destabilising effect on the economy, adversely affecting citizens through increased inflation, and complications in securing international finance. The U.S. leadership claims that it wants to support ordinary Iranians, but their actions only undermine this supposed good intent, and they end up playing politics with people's lives in an effort to appease their own support base and regional allies.

Prof. Nancy Gallagher, research professor at the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy, USA

- The humanitarian consequences of the reimposition of U.S. sanctions against Iran are particularly unfortunate and are already being widely condemned. European countries may want their first special purpose vehicle to focus on facilitating humanitarian trade since the United States claims that its sanctions are not intended to interfere with it.
- The political leaders [of Europe] are extremely angry about the Trump administration's withdrawal not only from the JCPOA, but

also from the Paris climate agreement and other important accords. They see Trump's trade wars as damaging their own economies and putting the global economy at risk. They also hate the imposition of secondary sanctions. But they have limited ability to convince private companies to take economic risks and they do not want their relationship with the United States to fall apart completely.

Prof. David Cortright, Director of Policy Studies at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, USA

- The UN Security Council supported the [nuclear] agreement and viewed it as a significant success of the use of diplomacy in combination with sanctions and with the offer to lift sanctions. That was a key part of the diplomatic agreement. So the UN is not supporting this [the U.S. withdrawal]. The European Union was also an active participant in the previous negotiation and supported the JCPOA; they have declared their opposition to the U.S action and they're trying as best as they can to maintain financial connections with Iran to try to avoid the secondary sanctions that U.S. is imposing on many financial institutions. The European Union is strongly opposed; some of the major trading countries in the world like China and India are opposed to the U.S actions. Russia is opposed. So the U.S is very isolated in this policy that it's undertaking.

- The sanctions are primarily focused on financial measures but when you make it difficult to finance trade, it means that the overall sanctions have an effect on everyone because you can't important necessary goods, exports become more difficult. And there are reports that some families are having difficulty being able to purchase pharmaceutical products and specialized drugs. So, there's definitely a price that the ordinary person pays when these kinds of broad commercial economic sanctions are imposed as we're seeing in Iran

Medea Benjamin, the co-founder of the Code Pink organization, USA

- President Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal makes a mockery of international cooperation and Trump's reimposition of sanctions punishes countries that want to abide by a deal that was approved not only by the negotiating parties but was passed unanimously by the UN Security Council. It is the height of imperial hubris. President Trump talked about wanting to withdraw from the deal during his campaign, so once he was president he wanted to fulfil that promise to his base and to his large campaign contributors. He has also been anxious to undo the major legacies of President Obama, from his healthcare bill to the Paris climate

accord to the Iran nuclear deal.

- We know the sanctions will hurt millions of ordinary Iranians because we already saw that when strict sanctions were imposed from 2010-2015, and we have seen how just the threat of these new sanctions has wreaked havoc on Iran's economy, with the value of the rial plummeting and prices skyrocketing. Major western companies have already pulled out of multi-billion dollar deals, which severely curtails Iran's economic options. And while the U.S. government insists that humanitarian aid is exempt, with the banks not wanting to handle financial transactions with Iran, critical medicines are already in short supply.

Prof. George A. Lopez, Vice-President of the Academy for International Conflict Management and Peacebuilding at United States Institute of Peace, USA

- I firmly believe that there were no substantial reasons related to the JCPOA -- and certainly no violations by Iran to the deal -- that provide either the logic or the evidence for the Trump administration withdrawing. I think it was a decision driven by the president being heavily influenced by Israel and the Saudis who made an argument about the continued existential threat that Iran might acquire nuclear weapons in the future and who latched on to the provision in the deal that some dimensions of it would expire 10 years hence.
- I think there's no question that imposing economic sanctions has become a highly preferred tool of the Trump administration. My own view is that the administration fails to comprehend what types of sanctions work best under what conditions and they particularly fail to understand or operationalize that sanctions must be smart and precisely targeted against those very particular entities or individuals responsible for the behavior the sanctions are meant to challenge or end. Finally, Trump does not understand that sanctions only work because they're one of many tools being applied to persuade and engage a target to work out our differences diplomatically. He seems to think the coercive element of sanctions is what leads to the capitulation of the target and the achievement of US goals. This is a dramatically oversimplified and naive view of sanctions that destine them to fail.

Paul Pillar, non-resident senior fellow at Georgetown University's Center for Security Studies, USA

- Economic sanctions have the attraction to US policymakers of

being a middle ground between doing nothing and using military force. Given the prominence of the United States in global economic affairs and especially in the worldwide financial system, the belief is that US sanctions will be more effective than sanctions imposed by other countries. In many instances, sanctions are used at least as much as a domestic political tool as anything else – a way of expressing disapproval of some foreign regime.

- The unilateralism of the Trump administration already has been politically condemned. The United States is isolated on this issue. The outcome of this struggle –the outcome that matters most – will be decided not at the ICJ but rather in the executive suites of European businesses. What remains to be seen is whether the secondary sanctions the United States tries to impose will deter enough non-US commerce with Iran that the JCPOA will not be saved.

Dr. Trita Parsi, president of the National Iranian American Council, USA

- The US's use of sanctions certainly seems to have reached a point in which certainly can have a destabilizing effect and in which other countries have been given incentives to put into place the building blocks of an alternative global financial system since Washington has decided to use the existing one as an instrument of American power.

- The Trump administration has made clear that they do not value nor respect human rights. Their neglect of human rights abuses in GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia, certainly does not give confidence that their focus on human rights in Iran is motivated by genuine concern for the Iranian people. In fact the sanctions Trump is imposing on Iran violates the Iranian people's human rights.

- I believe that broad economic sanctions are a form of collective punishment and as a result a violation of the Iranian people's human rights. We have clearly seen how sanctions among other things have created medicine shortages in Iran. One cannot claim concern for the Iranian people while pursuing policies that deliberately target and impoverishes ordinary Iranians.