

# There is no legal basis for the US sanctions on Iran ODVV interview with Medea Benjamin



By: Kourosh Ziabari

Iran is in the headlines once again. The United States has imposed the second round of sanctions against the Middle East nation after withdrawing from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, popularly known as the Iran nuclear deal. This time, the sanctions target Iran's oil and banking sectors and are expected to have an onerous effect on its economy. This is while the International Court of Justice had ruled following a complaint lodged by Iran to this court that the U.S. sanctions are illegal due to their detrimental impacts on the life of ordinary citizens and should be suspended. The United States ignored the ruling.

A prominent human rights activist told the Organization for Defending Victims of Violence that the United States government under President Trump has zero respect for international law and this became clear when he pulled out of the Paris climate accord, the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces treaty with Russia and the Iran nuclear deal.

Medea Benjamin said the U.S. pressure on different world countries to stop doing trade with Iran and buy its oil are unjustifiable: "The US pressure on [Iran's] oil clients has no legal justification, and the U.S. can only get away with this because it's a superpower. It can blackmail other countries because the dollar is so key to international financial transactions."

Medea Benjamin is the co-founder of the Code Pink organization and a contributor to several news websites, including The Huffington Post. In 2000, she was the Green Party candidate in California for the United States Senate, but didn't make it to the Congress. An outspoken opponent of the Iraq war and a vocal critic of the U.S. military interventions in the Middle East, Medea Benjamin disrupted an event hosted by the Hudson Institute on 19th of September this year where the U.S. Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook was speaking, to voice her anger at the U.S. policies on Iran.

In an exclusive interview with ODVV, Ms. Benjamin shared her views about the ongoing spat between Iran and the United States and the human impact of the U.S. sanctions. The following is the text of the interview.

**Q: What's your take on the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the Iran nuclear deal and the re-imposition of economic sanctions against Iran? What do you think drove President Trump to de-certify the Iran deal and decide to target Iran with new sanctions?**

A: President Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal makes a mockery of international cooperation and Trump's re-imposition 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. Trump also is closer than previous presidents to both Israel and Saudi Arabia, two countries that never wanted the U.S. to sign that deal. Finally, Trump brought into his inner circle people known for their hawkish posture towards Iran, including National Security Advisor John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

**Q: What's your view on the human impact of the U.S. sanctions against Iran? Do you agree that they will be the ordinary citizens who will suffer if the international community is not able to do business with Iran?**

A: 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



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Iran, critical medicines are already in short supply.

**Q: The UN special rapporteur on the unilateral coercive measures Idriss Jazairy noted in a statement on 22nd of August that the sanctions against Iran are illegitimate, destroy the economy of the nation as well as the country's currency and millions of people will be forced into poverty. What's your reaction to his statement?**

A: The UN special rapporteur's statement is totally on point. There is no legal basis for these sanctions and, indeed, sanctions that interfere with the importation of medicine and food have been declared illegal by the International Court of Justice.

**Q: Is the U.S. pressure on Iran's oil clients to stop their transactions with Tehran and refrain from buying its crude legally justifiable?**

A: The U.S. pressure on oil clients has no legal justification, and the U.S. can only get away with this because it's a superpower. It can blackmail other countries because the dollar is so key to international financial transactions. It's outrageous to see the U.S. strong arm both big and small nations alike, demanding that they either totally cut their oil purchases or granting them "waivers" if they agree to major cuts and agree to put Iran's money in accounts that can only be used for purchases that the US agrees to. These waivers, by the way, are also only temporary, as the U.S. continues its mafia-like push to strangle Iran's economy by bringing its

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oil exports down to zero.

**Q: Do you think the European Union will be able to salvage the nuclear deal now that the United States is no longer a party to it, keep the means of trade with Iran alive and convince the Islamic Republic to remain in the deal?**

A: It is not clear if the European Union will be able to salvage the deal. The mechanisms for the Special Purpose Vehicle are still being worked out, but the Trump administration has already declared that it will try to sabotage this effort. And even if this new financial arrangement is actually capable of circumventing U.S. sanctions, it's not clear that Western companies will want to take the risk. So far, it certainly doesn't look like they are willing to make themselves vulnerable to U.S. retaliation.

**Q: What do you think are the major goals behind the U.S. sanctions on Iran? Iran has stipulated restrictions on its nuclear program and the International Atomic Energy Agency has confirmed 11 times that Iran has kept its commitments. Why were the sanctions re-imposed then?**

A: The sanctions are not about Iranian nuclear weapons, which don't exist, but about regime change. They are designed to make life so miserable for Iranians that they will rise up and overthrow their government. Does the U.S. government have any idea or even care about what would happen afterwards? Just look at Iraq or Libya. Perhaps what the U.S. and Israel and Saudi Arabia want is simply chaos in Iran, so that Iran becomes a weak, divided state incapable of challenging other countries in the region or challenging U.S. hegemony.

**Q: The International Court of Justice ruled against the United States after Iran lodged a complaint to the court about the new sanctions, ordering that Washington should lift the restrictive measures. What does Washington's denial to abide by the ICJ's ruling tell you?**

A: The U.S. government, especially under the Trump administration, has contempt for international law. That was clear then it pulled out of the Paris climate accord, the nuclear deal and more recently, the INF, i.e. Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces treaty with Russia. But it is also clear from its refusal to acknowledge the International Criminal Court or the International Court of Justice. Of course, this is not really new. When the ICJ ruled against the U.S. in the case of mining Nicaragua's ports in 1984, the U.S. simply ignored the ruling. Superpowers, it seems, don't have to abide by the international rules imposed on weaker countries.

**Q: I'd like to ask you to share with us your view on the frequent use of the economic sanctions by superpowers as a punitive measure against other countries. Won't frequent and hard-hitting economic sanctions undermine diplomacy and multilateralism and foment tensions and instability across the world?**

A: Sometimes sanctions can be justified, especially when there is a movement for justice internally that is calling for those sanctions. That was the case in South Africa under apartheid, and it is the case today around Israel's repression of Palestinians. In other cases, however, sanctions tend to be unjust and a form of collective punishment. This has been the case with Cuba since the 1959 revolution and the case with Iraq during the time of Saddam Hussein. It has also been the case of Iran since the 1979 revolution. These sanctions have not had their intended effect of toppling governments; they have only served to hurt the people. In some cases, like that of Iraq, the consequences were devastating for the population, with enormous casualties resulting for the lack of medicines and food.