Since its inception, the Islamic Republic has faced a steady stream of sanctions, isolation and conflict—and Iranian hardliners perceive this as the environment in which they thrive. To that end, they have defied sanctions for over 30 years, take a certain pride in doing so, and are likely to continue doing both. Iran’s ruling elite sees sanctions as the West resorting to a pressure-based formula that history has proved ineffective due to the lack of viable policy alternatives. This reinforces Tehran’s self-perception of increasing strength, leverage and power vis-à-vis the West.

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ABSTRACT:

After the Baghdad and Moscow talks between P5+1—the United States, Britain, Russia, China, France, and Germany—and Iran did not lead to any serious concessions on either side over Tehran’s nuclear program, the European Union moved forward with the enforcement of an oil embargo on Iran starting the first of July, 2012. This paper looks at the robustness of the Iran oil sanctions from theoretical and cultural anthropological lenses, addressing why the current two-track policy pursued by the United States and the European Union on Iran, which includes the imposition of an oil embargo, is not sufficient to break the current nuclear stalemate.

THE EUROPEAN OIL EMBARGO ON IRAN: AN INTRODUCTION

The United States imposed broad economic sanctions against Iran after the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979—with Executive Order 12170 of November 1979—and particularly after the Iran hostage crisis of 1979-1981 and after the First Iran-Iraq Persian Gulf War—with Executive Order 12613 of October 1987. Despite their failure to weaken the Iranian regime, the number of sanctions on Iran continued to increase ever since, either in order to discourage Iran from sponsoring terrorism abroad, or—as we have seen with the wave of United Nations sanctions since 2006, and particularly with the United Nations Security
Council Resolution 1929 of 9 June 2010—in order to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions. However, while these sanctions—combined with a series of trade sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union and the United Kingdom since UNSCR 1929—have severely affected the Iranian economy, they have failed to choke off the funding for the Iranian nuclear program, and to deter Iran from pursuing the alleged nuclear weapons capabilities (Lux & Shour, 2011, pp. 192). In fact, explained Dr. Jahangir Amuzegar—a distinguished Iranian economist and former member of the IMF Executive Board—we do not even know to what extent these sanctions affected the Iranian economy.

“The Islamic government undoubtedly knows, or can assess: (a) the foregone value of its declined daily oil output due to the lack of access to Western technology; (b) greater transaction costs of banking and insurance in its foreign trade; (c) higher prices paid, and longer waiting time involved, in purchasing prohibited goods on the black markets; (d) higher interest rates paid for borrowing abroad or floating its own bonds; and (e) losses involved in delayed implementation of the country’s development projects—all due the sanctions. Yet, almost none of the data are available to outside investigators” (Amuzegar, 2010).

After the Moscow talks this June between P5+1 and Iran failed—when the latter insisted that some sanctions must be lifted before Iranian concessions could be made during negotiations—the European Union moved forward with its original plans of imposing an oil embargo on Iran starting the first of July (Mock, n.d.). This stance is consistent with the two-track policy pursued by the United States and the European Union on Iran as described by the United States’ Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton: “we are prepared to engage, if there is willingness on the other side, and we use sanctions—and the international community supports the use of sanctions—to try to create enough pressure on the regime that they do have to think differently about what they are doing” (Clinton, 2011). But, according to respected Iranian-American scholars—such as Hossein Askari (Askari, 2003) and Reza Marashi (Marashi, 2011), to name just a few—this approach could also be described as an oversimplified western solution to [in the case of Iran] a complex eastern problem. Even the opposition inside Iran has argued that the sanctions “are in fact a gift to the ruling powers by providing them with a pretext for cracking down further on political dissidents, and equating them with foreign enemies. It is also argued that the powerful Revolutionary Guard can manage to circumvent the sanctions, and even profit from the embargo, by engaging in wholesale contraband” (Amuzegar, 2010).

With the European Union striving to enforce an embargo on Iranian oil, this article will identify—using a cultural anthropological approach called ethnology, or “the study of the psychological superstructure of sociocultural systems” (Harris, 2001, pp. 301)—the theoretical and practical conditions that threaten its successful implementation. First, it will look at why multilateral oil sanctions have failed in the past, and second, it will assess if any of these conditions are present in the case of Iran today. The purpose of this study is to address the feasibility that oil sanctions will succeed in convincing the Iranian regime to abandon its nuclear ambitions. This close examination of the theory and practice of multilateral sanctions—as the Western solution (Rivlin, 2006)—is extremely important because without a strong theoretical background and without a close look at the political and economic feasibility of these sanctions, one cannot objectively weigh the strengths and weaknesses of the European Union’s oil embargo on Iran.

ON THE THEORY OF MULTILATERAL SANCTIONS

Many of the contradicting statements regarding oil sanctions among the policy makers of the “P5+1” countries—the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany—involving in current negotiations with Iran emerge from the very use of definitions and from their failure to understand how multilateral sanctions work, and when they fail. An example of the failure to understand
how multilateral sanctions work is the United States’ Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Human Rights Act of 2012. Titled as “an Act to strengthen Iran sanctions laws for the purpose of compelling Iran to abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons and other threatening activities, and for other purposes,” the bill calls for the “prompt enforcement of the current multilateral sanctions regime with respect to Iran” and for the “full, timely, and vigorous implementation of all sanctions enacted into law;” but fails to address the current lack of geostrategic conditions under which these sanctions can be implemented. This suggests that the United States and the European Union are using tough narratives in order to conceal a lack of capacity to enforce multilateral sanctions. In the end, the vague uses of the term multilateral sanctions—which derive from ambiguous definitions—in bills and policies will only lead to the failure of implementation. In the case of Iran, failure of implementation can lead to the failure of diplomacy, and—what I consider largely unacceptable in this situation—either a nuclear Iran, or the outbreak of war.

To avoid further confusion derived from epistemology and the use of terminology, this article adopts Steve Chan’s definition of sanctions as “the actual or threatened withdrawal of economic resources to affect a policy change by the target.” (Chan & Drury, 2000, pp. 2) and will complement it with that of Ivan Eland, who sees the purpose of sanctions “to have the maximum political effect through introducing psychological pressure against its political leaders and populace” (Eland, 1995, pp. 37). Starting with this definition, it is fair to admit upfront that this article belongs to the multilateral sanctions almost never work school of thought as defined by Nurnberger (Nurnberger, 2003, pp. 71). While it recognizes that under certain political and economic conditions sanctions “can indeed work in terms of influencing the policies of the actor against which they are ostensibly targeted,” (Taylor & International, 2010, pp. 21) this paper also agrees with the arguments of political science scholars like Edward Mansfield (Mansfield, 1994, pp. 119), Johan Galtung (Galtung, 1967), and George T. Doran (Doran, 1998), who argue against the use of multilateral sanctions as tools of foreign policy because of the increasing complexity of the very conditions required for implementation. The latter argument has also been made by Hossein Askari—the Iran Professor of International Business and Professor of International Affairs at the George Washington University—who wrote that “the idea that economic sanctions can address foreign-policy issues without military action requires a host of requisite economic and political conditions that are rarely found in the world in the right combination and at the right time” (Askari, 2003, pp. 28).

While the utility of sanctions was favored by many political scientists—most notably David Mitrany (Mitrany, 1925) and Albert Hirschman (Chan & Drury, 2000, pp. 1); and more recently Gary Haufbauer, Jeffrey Schott and Kimberly Elliott (HSE) (Hufbauer, Schott, & Elliott, 1990)—this article argues that multilateral sanctions almost always fail when used as instruments of coercion; disagreeing with scholars like Barfield and Groombridge (Barfield & Groombridge, 1998) who encourage—without solid argumentation—the use of multilateral sanctions by policy makers. In fact, recent research shows that the success rate of economic sanctions decreases when sanctions are multilateral, multi-issue, or when no international institution is present (Bapat & Clifton Morgan, 2009) because multilateral sanctions require a coalition with the political will and the economic power to impose the sanctions. Consequently, there are two main reasons depicted in academic literature to explain why multilateral sanctions more than often fail: failure to agree on the strategic purpose of imposed sanctions (a political consideration); and the differential cost of sanctions among the senders (largely an economic factor).

First, hardly ever do allies agree on the objective of imposed sanctions. David Baldwin writes that “neither war nor economics can be divorced from politics; each must be judged as an instrument serving the higher goals of the polity” (Baldwin, 1985, pp. 65); and economic sanctions are no exception to this rule. If the purpose of sanctions is “to affect a policy change by the target.” (Chan & Drury, 2000, pp. 2) then senders (the countries imposing the sanctions) (Hufbauer, Schott, & Elliott, 1990, pp. 35) must determine which policy the target (the immediate object of the sanctions episode) (Hufbauer et al., 1990, pp. 36) is
expected to change. Since each sender has different reasons to impose sanctions on the target (causing a conflict of the ends), and since only rarely do these motives coincide with those of the other senders, (Sperandei, 2009) reaching an agreement on imposing multilateral sanctions is extremely hard to realize.

Second, the cost of imposing sanctions is simply greater for some sender states than the potential benefits brought upon by the sanctions—meaning that some states are simply unwilling to share in the costs of sanctions; and would support them only if they get a free ride. Winston Churchill once said that “the inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings;” and this is also the case with the benefits of imposing economic sanctions. There are times when the costs of imposing sanctions are just too high to bear by the sender. Hufbauer, Schott, and Elliott (HSE) determined that the relative cost to the sender can be classified in one of four categories: “net gain to the sender” (usually the case when only aid is withheld); “little effect on sender” (when insignificant trade disruptions occur); “modest loss to sender” (when trade is lost, but loss is not substantial); and “major loss to sender” (when loss of trade adversely affects the sender’s economy) (Hufbauer et al., 1990, pp. 48). Each sender fits in one of the categories listed above; and in the case of multilateral sanctions, almost never do they fit under the same category.

Because this is the case, senders that incur a major loss as a result of the sanctions, are more likely to stop supporting the sanctions; causing their implementation to fail. This fact has been demonstrated consistently and convincingly by empirical evidence derived from both the HSE data set developed by Hufbauer, Schott, and Elliott (a total of 115 cases between 1970 and 1990) (Hufbauer et al., 1990); as well as from the Threat and Imposition of Sanctions (TIES) data set developed by T. Clifton Morgan (a total of 888 cases from 1971—2000) (Morgan, Bapat, & Krustev, 2009). The question to be answered here is if the Iran case is consistent with the conclusions reached by Morgan and Hufbauer, Schott, and Elliott.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: THE CASE OF IRAN

Being the product of western-based background knowledge—that conditions national security professionals to look favorably to the broad implementation of economic sanctions—it is only natural for this article to agree with Paul Rivlin—senior research fellow at the Tel Aviv University’s Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East and African Studies—who concluded that “the world could cope without Iranian oil far longer than Iran could manage with the loss of oil revenues. Iran is far more vulnerable to international energy sanctions than the rest of the world is to Iranian sanctions since the country is massively reliant on crude oil export revenues” (Rivlin, 2006). Combining Bapat’s theoretical mind with Rivlin’s sound logic on multilateral sanctions, however, this article questions the judgment of the Western scholars and policymakers involved in enlisting support for the European oil embargo on Iran without securing the support of Moscow, Beijing and New Delhi.

As seen in the previous section, and almost every time, the failure of multilateral sanctions lies more with the sender states, and less with the instruments of coercion (the means) (Bapat & Clifton Morgan, 2009). This also holds true with oil sanctions; however, in the case of oil, the means only worsen the chances of agreement between sender states—because of the impossibility of a coalition of senders to control the supply and demand of oil (unless this coalition is truly international, and consists of all five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany). Because of this, while multilateral sanctions can sometimes thrive in an environment where the sender states can afford to impose economic sanctions without having to rely on a coalition of senders with conflicting political objectives—the main political condition that is not satisfied by multilateral sanctions—multilateral oil sanctions simply always fail. Harvard University’s Rosemary Kelanic contended that there are no examples in history where oil was successfully used as an instrument of coercion, arguing that the global market for oil is structured to exacerbate the difficulties of imposing multilateral sanctions (Kelanic, 2009).
The academic literature—addressed in the previous theoretical section—already identified the two main reasons that explain why multilateral sanctions more than often fail: failure to agree on the strategic purpose of imposed sanctions (a political consideration); and the differential cost of sanctions among the senders (largely an economic factor). This section is meant to identify whether any of these two factors are present in the current imposition of oil sanctions on Iran.

First, it must be emphasized that while all six nations involved in negotiations with Iran—the United States, Britain, Russia, China, France, and Germany—agree on preventing Iran from achieving the technological threshold of developing an atomic bomb, not all of them agree on the imposition of oil sanctions. Politically speaking, in order for the oil sanctions to work, they will need to enlist the full support of the United Nations Security Council. This support is needed to “prevent backsliding by giving wavering states the means to resist domestic pressures and by reassuring states that a cooperative equilibrium will be maintained” (Drezner, 2000, pp. 98). Daniel W. Drezner—professor of international politics at Tufts University’s Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy—explained that multilateral economic sanctions that do not secure the support of an international organization—such as the United Nations—are fundamentally flawed. “This outcome is the result of enforcement difficulties. Although sender states might be able to fashion a cooperative bargain to sanctions, the equilibrium is not robust. Over time, domestic incentives might change such that secondary senders prefer ending their sanctions” (Drezner, 2000, pp. 97).

Unfortunately for the United States and the European Union, the support of the United Nations Security Council implies the full cooperation of Russia and China, of which Russia will be the hardest to convince to back the oil sanctions. While Russia has supported the first four rounds of sanctions as part of the United Nations Security Council, under Putin’s new leadership “Russia is sure to help Iran weather sanctions, but in an indirect and non-radical manner” (Najafi, 2012). Accordingly, Russia made it clear that it will not support the European Union’s oil sanctions against Iran, making an attempt to impose sanctions through the United Nations Security Council impossible. The Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated—in an interview this April on state-run news channel Russia 24 (?????? 24)—his country’s opposition to the oil embargo, arguing that the oil sanctions will only make the Iranian regime more determined to move forward with its nuclear program:

"The unilateral sanctions to which our Western partners resort, bypassing the Security Council, only strengthen ... those in Iran who are sure the West is not interested in resolving issues linked with non-proliferation of nuclear technologies, but is interested in regime change" (Gutterman, 2012).

Despite the criticism it attracted, Lavrov’s logic is solid. One of the most renowned scholars of international relations, Kenneth Waltz—Senior Research Scholar at the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies, and founder of neorealism—also argued the very same point:

"Diplomacy coupled with serious sanctions could convince Iran to abandon its pursuit of a nuclear weapon. But this outcome is unlikely: the historical record indicates that a country bent on acquiring nuclear weapons can rarely be dissuaded from doing so. Punishing a state through economic sanctions does not inexorably derail its nuclear program. Take North Korea, which succeeded in building its weapons despite countless rounds of sanctions and UN Security Council resolutions. If Tehran determines that its security depends on possessing nuclear weapons, sanctions are unlikely to change its mind. In fact, adding still more sanctions now could make Iran feel even more vulnerable, giving it still more reason to seek the protection of the ultimate deterrent” (Waltz, 2012).
Second, even if the political coalition of senders needed for the imposition of multilateral oil sanctions is formed, the dependency on Iranian oil of several sender states means that they will not be able to deal with the differential cost of sanctions among the senders themselves. Because Iran—who has the world’s fourth biggest reserves of oil—exports most of its oil to Asia (see Figure 1), particularly to China (543 bbl/d), Japan (341 bbl/d), India (328 bbl/d), and South Korea (244 bbl/d), these countries must also agree to join this united front on Iranian oil sanctions. However, all these countries are dependent on the Iranian oil, and it is impossible for them to participate in these oil sanctions—following Hufbauer, Schott, and Elliott (HSE) classification of senders (Hufbauer et al., 1990, pp. 48)—unless alternative suppliers willing to sign long-term contracts are found on short notice.

Because of many Asian countries’ inability to participate in the sanctions, one could rightfully assess that the impact the European Union’s oil embargo on Iran is highly exaggerated by the media. According to the U.S. Energy Information Agency, at the beginning of 2012 the European Union imported less than 18% of total Iranian exports (Figure 1). Even if, through some sort of miracle, a United Nations resolution that supports the oil sanctions is passed, it will be close to impossible to enforce in an environment where the importers of 82% of Iranian oil will be constantly tempted to break the embargo. “The dilemma for potential sanctioners is that even if all actors are better off with the imposition of multilateral sanctions, individual actors are even better off if they unilaterally defect while everyone else cooperates. The enforcement of sanctions is a collective action problem that needs to be addressed for it to have any utility” (Drezner, 2000, pp. 83).

![Figure 1. Iranian Crude Oil Exports From January to June 2011. (Data Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration; Author’s Representation.)](image-url)

China, who imports 22% of total Iranian crude exports, is the main nation that opposes the oil sanctions on Iran because of unbearable costs, in accordance with HSE’s “major loss to sender” argument (when loss of trade adversely affects the sender’s economy) (Hufbauer et al., 1990, pp. 48). China—whose global crude-oil imports rose 9.3% from January to April as compared to the same period during the previous year (Ma, n.d.)—needs the Iranian oil not only to ensure its own economic development, but also the security of the Communist regime. Despite this, the United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton—on the second day of official talks with the Chinese political elite in Beijing on May 4th—said that a “strong
and united stance on Iran was the best chance of compelling Tehran to address international concerns about its suspected nuclear-weapons program;” but did not mention if the United States is willing or able to help China alleviate its costs if it participates in the sanctions (“Clinton Calls on China to Join ‘United Front’ on Iran Sanctions,” 2012). It can be assumed, thus, that China will never agree to fully participate in the oil sanctions.

India, who imports 13% of total Iranian crude exports, is another state that cannot afford to impose sanctions on Iran. Kunwar Ratanjit Pratap Narain Singh—Minister of State in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas of India—acknowledged in May of 2012 that India will only be able to decrease Iranian crude imports by no more than 11% in case of an “embargo,” from 17.44 million tones during the 2011-2012 fiscal year, to 15.5 million tones during 2012-2013 (“India Decides to Cut Iran Crude Imports by 11 Percent,” 2012). While the United Nations sanctions have complicated the trade between India and Iran, the sanctions also brought the two Asian countries closer together, and offered India an opportunity to assert its independence from the West. It can only be speculated that India will defy any future oil sanctions imposed by the European Union because the United States has been unwilling to punish India for its trade with Iran in the past. This article agrees thus with the assessment of P. R. Kumaraswamy—Professor of Middle East Studies at New Delhi’s Jawaharlal Nehru University—who wrote in March of 2012 that “there are signs that India seeks to improve economic ties with Tehran. The explanation for this is that American inability to provide effective leadership in the Middle East has resulted in India’s readiness to defy the oil sanctions against Iran. India seeks to assert an independent foreign policy” (Kumaraswamy, 2012).

Finally, Turkey, Iran’s neighbor who benefited from international sanctions, increased bilateral trade with Iran 15 fold between 2000—when the Central Intelligence Agency first admitted Iran’s boost in capability to build a nuclear weapon (Risen, 2000)—and 2012, from USD 1 to 15 billion per annum. Not surprisingly, Turkey is expected to defy the European Union’s oil embargo, and will look for new ways to benefit from it. After Cevdet Yılmaz, Turkish Minister of Development, declared in Tehran in May of 2012 that “Turkey “will not support sanctions against the Islamic Republic,” Massoud Movahedi, the Iranian Deputy Commerce Minister, said “the two sides have planned to double the volume of their trade in the next three years” (AIRA, 2012).

This leaves Japan (with its 14% of total Iranian crude exports), South Korea (10%), South Africa (4%), and several other smaller states (3%) as the only states that could be coerced by the United States and the European Union to participate in the oil embargo. Not surprisingly, all these states have been exempted from the oil sanctions.

Using Drezner’s logic, it can be concluded that the equilibrium that the European oil embargo is trying to achieve is simply not robust. Because “target states will offer concessions to institutionalized sanctions, whereas they are more tempted to wait out ad hoc coalitions,” (Drezner, 2000, pp. 98) Iran will not budge. Iran views the sanctions as a zero-sum game: “they will be concerned that any concession made in the present will weaken their bargaining position in the future, either because of a material shift in cumulative power resources or a softening of their reputation. In this environment, any issue will have an increased salience” (Drezner, 2000, pp. 80). Instead, it will try to circumvent the sanctions by increasing its supplies to China, India, and Turkey, like it has done over the first two quarters of 2012 (according to the U.S. Energy Information Agency’s website).

Conclusion

Historically, oil sanctions consistently failed as an instrument of coercion because no one state holds the monopoly of supply, demand, or transportation of oil, and a country like Iran will always find other
countries willing to buy oil at a cheaper price. Moreover, historical record also indicates that economic sanctions have not persuaded North Korea—who perceived itself threatened by the West—from joining the nuclear club. Ultimately, while Israel, the United States, and the European Union have made it clear that they view “a significant Iranian enrichment capacity alone as an unacceptable threat” (Waltz, 2012), they might have to live with a nuclear Iran.

First, recent events—particularly the increase of Iranian oil exports to China, India, Turkey, and South Korea—have shown that Iran—the target—has the ability to circumvent the senders—the countries that will participate in the imposition of sanctions—by trading with other states that are dependent on Iranian oil (Bapat & Clifton Morgan, 2009). With these considerations in mind, this paper agrees with the inference of Energy Researcher Roger Stern—former fellow of the Princeton Environmental Institute—who argued that “the oil weapon seems an implausible threat when the economic, geographic, and military attributes of prospective user and victim are considered” (Stern, 2006). It also agrees with the assessments of Matthew Hulbert—Senior Researcher at Netherlands’ Clingendael International Energy Programme (CIEP)—who wrote that “the West’s oil carrot is actually a political turnip: Iran is never going to call time on enrichment on the back of oil threats, precisely because it still has easy access to Asian markets” (Hulbert, n.d.).

Second, failure in implementation due to disagreements among sender states is not the only reason why the oil embargo will fail. Paraphrasing Drezner, although the European oil embargo will impose significant costs on the Iranian regime, they will fail to alter its foreign policies because the regime views the oil sanctions and any concessions resulting from them as a direct attack to its sovereignty (Drezner, 2000, pp. 80). The argument here is that as long as sanctions are viewed by Iran as “driven by Israel” (Porter, 2012), the United States, or the European Union, the potential for them to work is null.

Finally, Waltz's line of reasoning that "the current sanctions on Iran can be dropped because they primarily harm ordinary Iranians, with little purpose" (Waltz, 2012) is sound. An ethnological study of the oil sanctions against Iran shows that hard power is not the way to deal with the Iranian regime. The current two-track policy pursued by the United States and the European Union on Iran, which includes the imposition of an oil embargo, is simply not sufficient to break the current nuclear stalemate. More importantly, war is not the answer either, despite recent statements made by Israeli and Western political and military leaders alike hinting to that very end. Joseph Nye—Harvard University Distinguished Service Professor and former Dean of the Kennedy School—eloquently argued that "… if the Americans, in efforts to try to stop the Iranians' nuclear weapons program, were to bomb nuclear facilities in Iran, they might gain a few years of slowing down the nuclear weapons program but they would lose the whole generation of younger Iranians who would respond in a nationalistic way […] that would be a very large cost for a very limited benefit" (Barzegar, 2008). Given the circumstances, one could hear the Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—the Supreme Leader of Iran—giddy with excitement in the background: "Yes We Can!"

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