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# THE IRAN DEAL IS A VICTORY FOR REASON AND ECONOMIC SANCTIONS

BY JOHN CASSIDY

*The agreement itself represents a victory for multilateralism and reason.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW HARNIK/AP



**T**he U.S. Congress, having apparently been granted the right under the Constitution to exercise power without responsibility, has often used it to block worthwhile international agreements.

After the First World War, an isolationist Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles and its creation of the League of Nations, which was the precursor to the United Nations. More recently, Congress rejected the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (in 1999) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (in 2012). Other international agreements, such as the Kyoto Protocol on reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, never even made it to the Senate, because they stood no realistic chance of being ratified.

Given this sorry record, it is welcome news indeed that the Obama Administration has secured the votes ([http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/03/world/obama-clinches-vote-to-secure-iran-nuclear-deal.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/03/world/obama-clinches-vote-to-secure-iran-nuclear-deal.html?_r=0)) it needed to prevent the Senate from rejecting a nuclear deal struck between Iran and the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, plus Germany, which will freeze Iran's nuclear program and greatly reduce its stockpiles of enriched uranium. On Wednesday, Senator Barbara Mikulski, of Maryland, became the thirty-fourth Democratic senator to express support for the agreement. Even if the Senate votes against the treaty, its opponents won't be able to override a Presidential veto. (My colleague Robin Wright has a sharp post examining the political fight over the deal (<http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/iran-a-done-deal>).)

The agreement itself represents a victory for multilateralism and reason. While even its defenders concede that it isn't perfect, it is clearly a lot better than nothing—as evidenced, for example, by the opposition (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/revolutionary-guard-head-opposes-un-backing-for-iran-deal/>) that it has stoked among Iranian hardliners. Moreover, at a time when the rise of radical Islamism is threatening the Middle East, improving relations with an important regional power like Iran, if such a thing is possible, is clearly in the strategic interests of the United States.

In addition, the agreement represents another important success for economic sanctions and the principle that there are ways short of military action to change the policies of rogue states. For many decades, the conventional wisdom among historians and foreign-policy experts, especially those of the hawkish variety, was that sanctions don't work. From Mussolini's Italy to Castro's Cuba to Brezhnev's Soviet Union to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the pessimistic argument held that international restrictions on trade, investment, and other economic transactions had been tried and had failed.

This isn't the place to rehearse the historical debate, but it's worth noting that the arguments against sanctions often overlooked the fact that, in some cases, they were never imposed properly in the first place (Mussolini's Italy), or weren't extensive enough to prevent countries from circumventing them (Cuba and the Soviet Union), or were more successful than it appeared at the time. (Iraq is a case in point. After Hussein was captured, he told his U.S. interrogators that his weapons of mass destruction "had been eliminated by the U.N. sanctions.")

And there is evidence that cleverly designed sanctions, forcefully imposed, can change the behavior of repressive regimes. We saw that in 2003, when Libya, under Muammar Qaddafi, agreed to dismantle its nuclear program and give up its other weapons of mass destruction, in return for the unfreezing of financial assets and other moves to relax sanctions. We saw it again in November, 2013, when, after seven years in which existing international sanctions against Iran had been extended and redirected to impact members of its ruling élite, Hassan Rouhani's government agreed (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25074729>) to freeze its nuclear program and enter talks with the United States and other members of the "P5+1" group.

At the time, some experts still doubted whether Iran was serious. In a post about the breakthrough (<http://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/iran-nuke-deal-do-economic-sanctions-work-after-all>), I quoted an interview with Gary Samore (<http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/q-a-obamas-former-arms-control-cordinator-on-iran>), a Harvard professor who worked on arms-control issues in the Clinton Administration and the first Obama Administration. "Yes, the sanctions have worked to pressure Iran to accept temporary limits on its nuclear program," Samore said. "But whether the remaining sanctions and the threat of additional sanctions will be sufficient to force Iran to accept more extensive and permanent nuclear limits is unclear.... In six months, we'll have a better idea which argument is correct." It took more than six months, but Samore now believes that the sanctions worked. "I think President Obama's strategy succeeded," Samore told the *Times*' Michael Gordon (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/12/world/middleeast/head-of-group-opposing-iran-accord-quits-post-saying-he-backs-deal.html>) last month. "He has created economic leverage and traded it away for Iranian nuclear concessions."

There are many people in Washington who say that the U.S. government should have demanded more concessions from Iran. However, the way in which they couch this argument is instructive. Far from claiming that the sanctions on Iran didn't work, some of the deal's leading critics are calling for them to be kept in place for another ten years. In a legislative amendment they proposed in June, Republican Senator Mark Kirk, of Illinois, and Democratic Senator Robert Menendez, of New Jersey, sought to extend the 1996 Iran Sanctions Act, which is due to expire in 2016, to 2026. "Iran needs to know that [sanctions] will continue to exist unless there is a deal," Kirk told the Huffington Post ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/07/02/iran-sanctions-congress\\_n\\_7709538.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/07/02/iran-sanctions-congress_n_7709538.html)).

Since the other members of the P5+1 have already accepted the terms of the Iran agreement, which John Kerry and his team negotiated on the U.S.'s behalf, the idea of throwing it out and starting over with the sanctions still in place is impractical. If Congress rejected the deal, the international coalition would surely break apart, and, as Senator Mikulski said in a press release (<http://www.mikulski.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/mikulski-statement-in-support-of-joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action-to-prevent-iran-from-developing-nuclear-weapons>) explaining why she was supporting the agreement, "Sanctions would be porous, or limited to unilateral sanctions by the U.S."

Piecemeal economic sanctions of that sort rarely work: that we know. But we also know that tough sanctions, properly applied, can be effective. As the Kirk–Menendez bill indicated, even hawks now agree with that proposition. And that, actually, is a pretty important development.



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