

US imposes draconian new sanctions against Iran amid spiraling COVID-19 pandemic

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The Trump administration Thursday imposed a draconian new round of economic sanctions against Iran aimed at destroying the country's economy and forcing through Washington's policy of regime change by means of the starvation and deprivation of the Iranian population.

Announced by Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, the sanctions target 18 Iranian banks with secondary sanctions, effectively cutting Iran off from the world financial markets. Mnuchin declared that the action "reflects our commitment to stop illicit access to US dollars," adding that it would "continue to allow for humanitarian transactions to support the Iranian people."

This last assertion is a blatant lie. The 18 banks were the last ones not to be slapped with secondary sanctions, which subject any financial institution daring to do business with them to being barred from US markets. The effect is to blacklist the entire Iranian financial sector, crippling the country's ability to purchase desperately needed food, medicine and medical supplies under conditions in which the COVID-19 pandemic is ravaging the country. The US action makes it virtually impossible for Iran to gain access to tens of billions of dollars in state assets held in overseas banks.

US authorities made no attempt to implicate the banks in any supposedly illicit activities—financing "terrorism," purchasing arms or involvement in Iran's nuclear program. Instead, 16 were charged with the "crime" of "operating in Iran's financial sector," one was accused of being controlled by a previously sanctioned bank and another with being "military-affiliated."

The "maximum pressure" sanctions campaign launched by the Trump administration after it

unilaterally repudiated the 2015 nuclear accord between Tehran and the great powers two years ago had already crippled much of Iran's economy, largely preventing it from selling oil, the country's economic lifeblood. In the 12 months ending in March 2020, Iranian oil sales stood at little more than \$20 billion, down from \$120 billion in 2011.

Last month, in an act of unbridled arrogance, Washington invoked the "snapback" provisions of the 2015 nuclear accord that the US had itself abrogated, demanding that the United Nations re-impose sanctions that it had lifted in return for Tehran accepting strict limitations on its civilian nuclear program. All four of the other permanent members of the UN Security Council, which are signatories to the deal, rejected Washington's demand.

The US has particularly demanded the maintenance of a ban on the export of conventional weapons to Iran, which is set to expire on October 18 under the terms of the nuclear deal. While both Russia and China have indicated interest in arms sales to Iran, Washington has vowed to unilaterally enforce the ban, raising the prospect of a confrontation between the world's major nuclear powers.

Iranian authorities have denounced the new sweeping sanctions against the country's financial sector. Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, tweeted that the "U.S. regime wants to blow up our remaining channels to pay for food & medicine. Iranians WILL survive this latest of cruelties. But conspiring to starve a population is a crime against humanity."

Speaking before United Nations General Assembly session on counterterrorism Thursday night, Iran's UN ambassador, Majid Takht-Ravanchi, accused Washington of "state terrorism and economic and medical terrorism."

“The policy of maximum pressure by the US on Iran is designed to deliberately and indiscriminately target innocent civilians with the aim of creating suffering and hardship, as well as stoking social unrest in accordance with the flawed policy of regime change,” Takht-Ravanchi said.

The new sanctions have hit precisely at a point in which Iran is confronting a devastating resurgence of COVID-19, being referred to by medical authorities as a “third wave” of the pandemic. Within the last few days, the country has seen record numbers of new cases and daily deaths. On October 9, Iran’s Health Ministry confirmed 4,142 new coronavirus cases, bringing the total number of cases to nearly half a million. Over the previous 24 hours, 210 COVID-19 patients had died, bringing the country’s total death toll to 28,098. Over the past week, at least 1,500 have died.

The sharp increase in COVID-19 cases has overwhelmed Iran’s hospitals, particularly in the capital of Tehran and its suburbs, which have been hardest hit by the pandemic. The doctor who heads the infectious diseases department at Tehran’s Masih Daneshvari Hospital told the state-run news agency IRINN: “Due to the unavailability of beds in intensive care units and even in emergency units, ambulances go from one hospital to another to have patients admitted. Newly-arriving coronavirus patients have to wait for beds to become free.”

The Iranian Armed Forces have announced that they are making all of their medical facilities available to treat COVID-19 patients, while civilian hospitals have ceased all non-emergency functions to make room for those who have fallen ill with the deadly virus.

Schools, which the government recklessly reopened last month, have been closed in Tehran and some other cities, as have mosques, shops, restaurants and other public venues. Initially announced as a one-week lockdown on October 3, the governor on Friday extended it for another week.

Even before the pandemic, the US sanctions regime had deprived the Iranian health care system of essential medicines and medical equipment, leading to many preventable deaths. With the pandemic, the sanctions are taking an ever-greater toll, amounting to a massive war crime against a civilian population.

The sweeping sanctions have sharply escalated tensions between the US and Iran, which are already

facing off on a number of fronts. Washington has beefed up its military presence in the region, sending the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz, together with the guided-missile cruisers USS Princeton and USS Philippine Sea and the guided-missile destroyer USS Sterett through the Strait of Hormuz into the Persian Gulf last month. It marked the first such deployment of a carrier strike force in nearly a year.

Meanwhile, in Iraq, the Trump administration’s bully-boy Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has given an ultimatum to the newly installed prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, that if he fails to crack down on Iraqi Shi’a militias that are aligned with Iran, the US will shut down its embassy in Baghdad. US officials have made it clear that this would be the prelude to wide-ranging US airstrikes against militia positions. Organized in the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), these militias are part of the Iraqi armed forces, functioning as a kind of national guard. They played a predominant role in the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) after it seized control of a wide swath of Iraq in 2014.

Each of these actions, from the carrier deployment to the threats in Iraq and now the crippling new financial sanctions in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic has the character of a calculated provocation, designed to escalate tensions. These tensions were already brought to the boiling point last January, with the US drone missile assassination of Lt. Gen. Qassem Suleimani, one of Iran’s most senior officials, after he arrived at Baghdad international airport for an official state visit.

Faced with a rapidly deteriorating political situation at home in the run-up to the November 3 election, there is an evident threat that the Trump administration will deliberately trigger a war with Iran as an “October Surprise,” an event designed to shock the electorate and create more favorable conditions for the execution of the extra-constitutional conspiracies that are being hatched in the White House.



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