



'Treating us like garbage': New sanctions announced as many Iranian Americans feel fed up with Trump

Kim Hjelmgaard and Deirdre Shesgreen, USA TODAY

Jason Nazmiyal, a prominent Persian carpet dealer based in New York, is used to America's red tape when it comes to Iran.

For years, the Iranian American businessman has expertly navigated Washington's sanctions and export rules to sell his pricey antique rugs – woven works of art – all over the world. But now, he says the Trump administration has so tainted any dealings with Iran that once simple business tasks have taken on a senseless and disorienting quality.



© Getty Images A young U.S. citizen, originally from Iran, holds an American flag during a celebration where she received her citizenship papers, on July 9, 2018 in Los Angeles.

Nazmiyal, 60, was recently blocked from purchasing a carpet that was already in the U.S. and had not been anywhere near Iranian soil for decades.

"This is the nonsense we have to deal with," he said.

"It's becoming so difficult for us in the U.S. and also it's hard to see how the sanctions harm Iran's government, as opposed to its people," said Nazmiyal, who left Iran for the U.S. in 1978, a year before the Islamic revolution.

While some Iranian Americans fully support President Donald Trump, Nazmiyal is among scores of Iranian Americans who have no loyalty to the repressive regime in Tehran, but who are fed up with a White House that has vilified their homeland, banned their family members from visiting the U.S., and stoked fears of a military conflict.

From the Muslim ban to an endless stream of sanctions and saber-rattling, they hear about their relatives suffering in Iran and feel increased hostility in their adopted homeland.



Nazmiyal Jason Nazmiyal in New York City.

New sanctions, maximum impact?

The human cost of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran is most visible in Iran itself. After Trump withdrew the U.S. from a nuclear deal between Iran and world powers a little over two years ago, he has gradually reimposed crushing sanctions on vast swathes of Iran's economy, its diplomats and its intelligence and security entities.

The latest sanctions were unveiled Thursday by the U.S. Treasury Department targeting Iran's financial sector. They could completely sever Iran's economy from the outside world except in extremely limited circumstances.

They target 18 more banks, effectively placing Iran's entire financial sector off-limits and forcing it to rely even more on informal or illicit trade.

Trump admin insists UN sanction restored on Iran:

No, they're not, UN says "Amid Covid19 pandemic, U.S. regime wants to blow up our remaining channels to pay for food & medicine,"

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif tweeted, in reaction. "Iranians WILL survive this latest of cruelties."

Sanctions have hit Iran's economy hard. GDP has contracted sharply. Oil exports have plummeted. The value of Iran's rial currency has been cut in half and there has been runaway inflation alongside mass unemployment and skyrocketing living costs. The official U.S. policy is that it doesn't sanction humanitarian aid, but access to a range of critical health care drugs and products has become more difficult as imports

have stalled. The sanctions have deterred many international banks from working with Iran over fears that they too could be caught up in so-called secondary U.S. sanctions.

Who's going to derail the U.S. election?

The culprit may be close to home "The Trump administration's blanket maximum pressure policy has made it so no bank in the world is going to even want to touch Iran, regardless of the reason," said Ali Scotten, 40, a second generation Iranian American who was born in Arizona and works as a consultant on Middle East issues.

He worries about his relatives in Iran. "The daily cost of living has become astronomically higher," Scotten said, adding that Trump's punishing sanctions have soured Iranians' views toward the U.S.

Trump and his advisers say their strategy is aimed at forcing Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions, curb its ballistic missile program, and end its support for militant proxy groups across the Middle East.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Trump have repeatedly said these actions will eventually force Iran to seek a new agreement.

"Our maximum economic pressure campaign will continue until Iran is willing to conclude a comprehensive negotiation that addresses the regime's malign behavior,"

Pompeo said in a statement touting Thursday's sanctions. "The United States continues to stand with the Iranian people, the longest-suffering victims of the regime's predations."

Iran's leaders have consistently rejected the president's entreaties and pushed the U.S. to rejoin the existing agreement. Iran says it doesn't care whether it's Trump or his potential successor, Democratic Vice President Joe Biden, who does this.

Iran's nuclear material

Critics say Trump's policy has failed.

Experienced Iran-watchers such as Barbara Slavin, director of the Future of Iran Initiative at the Atlantic Council think tank in Washington, D.C., point out that Iran is now enriching uranium at a higher level than at any point since the Obama administration brokered the nuclear agreement in 2015.

Iran may even soon have sufficient fissile missile material to produce a nuclear weapon. And it has become more, not less, aggressive in the Persian Gulf and Iraq.

As U.S. and Iran tensions have spiked to dangerous levels, the U.S. policy has also deepened a divide between the U.S. and its closest allies in Europe, a point raised by Democratic vice-presidential nominee Kamala Harris during her Wednesday night debate with Vice President Mike Pence.

'I'm speaking': Harris, Pence clash at vice presidential debate with body language Trump's approach to Iran has been an "embarrassing mix of economic sanctions, botched diplomacy, and harsh rhetoric," Slavin wrote in a recent analysis. Some

critics have suggested the Trump's administration true goal in Iran is to topple the regime.

Sanctions part and parcel of U.S.-Iran relations

That would be just fine with Afshine Ash Emrani, a 52-year-old cardiologist in California and full-throated Trump supporter.

Emrani came to the U.S. with his parents when he was 17 years old – fleeing the regime's persecution of Iranian Jews. He voted for Trump in 2016 and counts himself as an even stronger supporter of the president now, even though he doesn't like Trump's sometimes "crass" rhetoric.

He views Trump's recent foreign policy victories – persuading the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain to normalize ties with Israel – as a major step toward further isolating Iran.

"It's going to take away a lot of the regime's power... because now the entire region will be against them," he said.

"My hope is that it will be a stepping stone towards changing the regime in Iran" and making the government more friendly to both Israel and America.

But for Sahand Mirzahosseini, a 39-year-old Chicagoan who works in the pharmaceutical industry, Trump's election has brought nothing but anxiety and fear. When Trump ordered a drone strike that killed Iran's most powerful military leader, "that was terrifying," he said. "I was like, well, this is war."

Mirzahosseini's parents left Iran after the revolution, and he has few family ties there now.

"I feel torn about the direction America is taking because it is my home," he said.

As a gay man, Mirzahosseini said he also feels targeted by Trump's domestic policies, and he said it's "heartbreaking" to see the "open hostility" toward the LGBTQ community and people of color.

According to the U.S. Department of State, there are an estimated 500,000 to one million people of Iranian descent living in the U.S., the highest number of Iranians outside Iran. The biggest Iranian-American communities are in California, followed by the New York and Washington D.C. metropolitan areas.

A majority do not support Trump's policies, according to a 2019 survey from the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA), a non-partisan group that represents their interests. That survey found that two-thirds (66%) of Iranian-Americans feel that Trump has handled relations between the two adversaries "poorly."

More than 8 in 10 Iranian Americans said they have either directly been impacted by Trump's 2017 travel ban on several Muslim-majority countries, including Iran, or have friends and family who have been impacted. Iran visas have been routinely denied since the ban.

By contrast, when PAAIA's survey was conducted the year before Trump took office, in 2016, more than two-thirds (71%) of respondents rated the Obama administration's handling of U.S.-Iran relations as "excellent" or "good."

The survey revealed the expectation that the nuclear deal could serve as a path to improved U.S.-Iran relations – soured by decades of hostility that began when the CIA helped orchestrate the ouster of Iran's democratically elected leader in 1953.

By 1979, amid the birth of the Islamic Republic, 52 Americans were held hostage in the former U.S. Embassy for 444 days.

Economic sanctions have been a regular part of the U.S.-Iran story ever since.

Fearing discrimination

But it is not just about the inconvenience of having to apply for visa waivers that has concerned Iranian Americans under the Trump presidency.

PAAIA's survey found that 71% of Iranian Americans are worried about increased discrimination and 63% have either personally experienced discrimination or know someone else who has because of their ethnicity or country of origin.

A majority (62%) fear possible U.S. military strikes against Iran, where they have many friends and relatives and retain deep cultural connections.

Scotten, the Iranian American from Arizona, said that just a few days after Trump's election in 2016, his mother and a friend were hiking.

"They were speaking Farsi and a lady started berating them for speaking a different language," he said. It was the first time in her 40 years in the U.S. that she's been harassed.

"It's a direct result of Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric" and efforts to make Americans afraid of immigrants, he said.

For Nazmiyal, the Trump administration's Iran policy has brought a big economic hit, since 75% of his sales are in Persian rugs, and 40% of his business involves shipping these overseas.

But for Iranian American and San Francisco-resident Delfarib Fanaie the prohibitions have hurt those who can least afford it: poor and vulnerable children.



© AFP via Getty Images A man walks past a mural painted on the outer walls of the former U.S. embassy in the Iranian capital Tehran, on September 29, 2020.

Fanaie runs Moms Against Poverty (MAP), an organization that sends humanitarian relief to Iran for underprivileged children. MAP has an official license from the U.S. Treasury Department that permits it to legally transfer funds to Iran from its bank in the U.S., via the banking system in Canada, and then onward to a bank in Tehran.

Since 2008, MAP has helped build more than 175 schools, orphanages, health clinics and cultural centers in Iran.

Yet Fanaie said that while MAP itself has had little overt trouble from the U.S. Treasury Department, and in 2020 it actually saw the amount of humanitarian funds it is allowed to send under its export license to Iran increase because of the coronavirus pandemic, the problem is that the vast majority of international financial institutions are scared that if they do business with a U.S. entity sending money to Iran, they too will be sanctioned by Washington.

The result of all this, Fanaie said, is that her organization needs to be "in constant touch" with the U.S. Treasury Department to try to find obscure and mercurial banking channels to send MAP funds to Iran even though the U.S. government insists it has not created any barriers to these channels.

"Every day I am worried that a (bank) available to us the day before won't be there in the morning," she said.

"I mean, what is the point of having humanitarian permission to help undeserved children in Iran and then effectively make it nearly impossible for most organizations to transfer these funds?"

Some Iranian-Americans are conflicted about the Trump presidency.

Darius Massoudi, 32, a public policy advisor and lawyer for the state of Washington, said that in some respects Trump is "the best U.S. president ever" because he has

taken such a hard line against a brutal regime. Human Rights Watch and other groups say Iran uses lethal force to crush political dissent and arbitrarily detains, tortures and kills protesters who demand freedom of expression and assembly. Iran denies this. At the same time, Massoudi says Trump's rhetoric has made him feel unwelcome.

"There's some of us who are like, well, we live in this country and Trump is treating us like garbage," said Massoudi, referring to the travel bans and his belief that Trump has disparaged minority groups.

Massoudi said he briefly considered emigrating to Canada, which has a growing Iranian diaspora.

How would it change in a Biden presidency?

U. S. intelligence agencies have concluded that Iran has sought to undermine Trump ahead of the U.S. presidential election.

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"Democrats are softer compared to Republicans," Iran's Sharq newspaper noted in a recent editorial, according the Atlantic council.

"I'm really nervous about this election," said Mirzahosseini. "Four more years of Trump means ... honestly who knows."

But it's not clear that for Iranian Americans, a Biden presidency would be a panacea, despite his pledge that if elected he would work to get back in the nuclear deal that Trump abandoned.

Biden may want to re-enter the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (as the nuclear deal is known) as quickly as possible, but he may not be able to automatically lift all of the Trump administration's sanctions, as the Atlantic Council and others have pointed out.

And Iran may consider that a sticking point before it restarts complying with the nuclear accord, which it stayed in while the U.S. dropped out.

Iran's top diplomat Zarif also said recently that the country may insist on some form of compensation from the U.S. for its treatment by the Trump administration.

"The question mark on Biden is going to be will he have the guts to re-enter the deal in a way that Iran feels necessary," said Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, founder of Bourse & Bazaar, a London based news and research group that focuses on Iran's economy.

"Some of the folks around Biden have suggested that the U.S. might want to take advantage of the leverage that's been gained because of the Trump sanctions," he said.

Batmanghelidj said Iran's difficulties in importing foods and life-saving medicines have been made worse by COVID-19, but he did not believe Iran would be "coerced into new negotiations" and let the U.S. "dictate the terms" of its own re-entry to the

nuclear deal and that even though Iran's economy is in bad shape it will be able to "limp along."

Scotten, the consultant on Middle East issues from Arizona, said supporting Biden is a "no-brainer" for him, because he has promised to return to the nuclear deal and lift the Muslim ban.

"Obviously there's 40 years of mistrust and rivalry between the U.S. and Iranian governments, so there's not going to be normalization of relations overnight," he said.

"(But) there's an absolute night-and-day difference between the two candidates," he said. "

And just like on a personal level, the Muslim ban being rescinded (would mean) my family can come visit us again," he added, recounting that his mother's sister was unable to attend his father's funeral in 2018 because of the ban.

For Nazmiyal, who has a collection of 4,000 antique and vintage rugs, the last few years have been about weathering frustrations, economic and political.

He believes that no matter who wins the election on Nov. 3 the Iranian people will still continue to suffer.

He has also devised a new strategy of sorts for dealing with the sanctions on Iran.

After months of trying to figure out a workaround to purchase the carpet that had not set foot in Iran for more than 100 years: He gave up.

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