

# Opinion: Sanctions on Iran would backfire

By Rebecca Griffin

Special to the Mercury News

October 1, 2009

It was right before the Iranian elections and I listened as my cabdriver raced through the outskirts of Tehran. He shared his loathing for the regime, rooted in family tragedy. His brother was one of thousands of political prisoners murdered by the regime at the end of the Iran-Iraq war. When we explained that we came to Iran as part of a U.S. peace delegation, he replied, "What you are doing is very important because I hate this regime, but I would pick up a gun to defend it."

Negotiations with Iran begin today in Geneva. Following last week's revelation that Iran has a clandestine nuclear site near Qom, Congress is pushing with full force toward a unilateral fuel embargo. Most members of Congress forget the hard lessons of history, which this cabdriver reinforced: Sanctions are likely to backfire.

Since Iran's disputed presidential election, much of Congress has been driven by a desire to get tough on Iran. The Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act, which lead sponsor Rep. Howard Berman, D-Van Nuys, has called a "sword of Damocles over the Iranians," would punish companies that sell gas to Iran. In the midst of heightened rhetoric, it has gained more than 300 House co-sponsors and 75 in the Senate.

Although Iran's secret nuclear site raises real concerns, administration officials have acknowledged that the bottom line of the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate remains the same: Iran is years away from the ability to produce a nuclear weapon.

The congressional rush toward punitive action is misplaced, as concerns about the site should be addressed in the course of negotiations. Iran has demonstrated a willingness to open the site to inspectors, an important first step.

Congress is caught in the notion that crippling sanctions will bring the Iranian regime to its knees. Iran will find ways to circumvent a fuel embargo, especially given the reluctance of China and Russia to back one.

Iran is planning to expand its refining capacity and can get fuel from countries such as Venezuela, which has already offered its help. The embargo will also give Ahmadinejad the excuse he's been waiting for to lift government subsidies on fuel, creating hardship for regular Iranians while the U.S. takes the political hit. Iranian opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi recently stated his unequivocal objections to sanctions, noting they "will impose agonies on a nation who suffers enough from miserable statesmen."

There is little historical evidence to support this proposal. Sanctions, including multilateral sanctions, have only worked 34 percent of the time, according to the Peterson Institute's assessment of 174 cases worldwide. In the past 30 years, there has not been a single instance of U.S. sanctions eliciting positive changes in the Iranian regime's behavior. Instead, Iranian leaders have learned to not only circumvent sanctions but to profit from the state-centered economy that emerged as a result.

The belief that sanctions lead people to rise against their government is also wishful thinking.

In fact, Iran's nuclear technology program enjoys widespread public support. Hostility from the United States would give Ahmadinejad means to rally his crumbling base by bolstering a favorite narrative: The U.S. government threatens Iranians and does not respect their sovereignty and regional power.

President Barack Obama laid the groundwork for rethinking our relationship with Iran. Congress should step back and allow the administration's good faith diplomacy to bear fruit.

*REBECCA GRIFFIN of Oakland, Peace Action West's political director, traveled to Iran in May before the tumultuous elections. She wrote this article for the Mercury News*