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Reflecting the Challenges of International Law in Legitimizing Nuclear Sanctions Against the Islamic Republic of Iran

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine international sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic of Iran, with a particular focus on its nuclear activities, and to analyze the legitimacy of these measures from the perspective of international law. It seeks to evaluate the extent to which the sanctions conform to the principles and rules of international law and their effects on Iran's legal and political standing within the international system. The research methodology is descriptive-analytical, with data collected through library and documentary sources. Content analysis of international documents, Security Council resolutions, multilateral treaties, and legal opinions served as the main data-gathering tool. Using a comparative approach, the legitimacy and effectiveness of the sanctions were critically assessed. Findings indicate that nuclear-related sanctions against Iran have been imposed both by the Security Council and unilaterally by major powers. Unilateral sanctions are predominantly outside the framework of the United Nations Charter, and their legal legitimacy faces serious challenges. The effects of these sanctions extend beyond economic consequences, encompassing significant political and social implications, including impacts on human rights and Iran's right to development. Legal analysis reveals that, in many cases, the sanctions reflect power dynamics and political objectives of dominant states, undermining their legal validity due to violations of international law principles and fundamental rights of citizens. Conversely, Iran has sought to assert the legitimacy of its peaceful nuclear activities by relying on international law and employing legal diplomatic instruments. The study concludes that nuclear sanctions against Iran are driven more by political and power considerations in the international system than by justifications grounded in international law. Nonetheless, employing proactive legal strategies, strengthening legal diplomacy, and leveraging the discourse of human rights and the right to development can mitigate the harmful effects of sanctions and enhance Iran's legal legitimacy.

Keywords: *International Law, Legitimization, Nuclear Sanctions, Islamic Republic of Iran*

Introduction

Over the past four decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been subjected to a wide range of international sanctions, commonly justified on grounds such as its nuclear program, alleged human rights violations, or support for armed groups. However, in numerous instances, the conformity of these sanctions with the principles and rules of international law has been the subject of serious legal debate. In international legal doctrine, sanctions are



generally understood as coercive measures adopted by states or international organizations with the aim of influencing the behavior of a target state or specific individuals, short of the use of armed force (1, 2).

In recent years, Iran has faced particularly severe economic sanctions, especially by the United States, in response to its nuclear activities. Given that the development and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes constitute a recognized right of states under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), such pressures appear to be driven less by objectives explicitly articulated in the United Nations Charter and more by enduring political considerations (3, 4). This interpretation is reinforced by the legal framework governing the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which affirms the right of member states to pursue uranium enrichment for peaceful ends under international supervision (5, 6).

More than two decades after the emergence of the Iranian nuclear dispute, international sanctions have evolved into one of the most complex legal, political, and economic phenomena within the contemporary international system. These measures have not only reshaped diplomatic relations between Iran and other states but have also become a critical test case for assessing the capacity of international law to regulate, constrain, and legitimize both unilateral and multilateral coercive actions (7, 8).

Contemporary international law is founded on core principles such as state sovereignty, *pacta sunt servanda*, the prohibition of the use of force, and respect for human rights. Nevertheless, the extensive sanctions imposed on Iran—particularly those associated with its nuclear program—have, at various points, placed significant strain on these foundational norms (9, 10). From a doctrinal perspective, the breadth and intensity of these sanctions raise questions about their compatibility with the principles of proportionality, necessity, and non-intervention.

Initially, sanctions against Iran derived their formal legitimacy from resolutions adopted by the United Nations Security Council under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Yet, the modalities of their implementation, their expansive scope, and especially their wide-ranging effects on the fundamental rights of Iranian citizens remain highly contested within international human rights law (11, 12). In parallel, unilateral and secondary sanctions imposed by the United States—often compelling compliance by non-U.S. companies and financial institutions—have generated substantial debate concerning extraterritorial jurisdiction and the infringement of other states' sovereignty (13, 14).

In the contemporary international order, sanctions have increasingly functioned as a central instrument of non-military coercion and soft power, serving both the foreign policy objectives of powerful states and the enforcement mechanisms of the Security Council. Although their non-kinetic character may initially suggest a higher degree of legitimacy compared to armed force, their legal, economic, and humanitarian consequences pose profound challenges to both classical and modern conceptions of international law (15, 16).

Iran represents one of the most prominent and sustained cases of international sanctions in modern history. Since the late 1970s—and with greater intensity following the expansion of its nuclear activities—Iran has been subjected to an extensive array of measures, including UN Security Council sanctions, unilateral sanctions by states such as the United States, and restrictive measures adopted by the European Union. The unprecedented scale and diversity of these sanctions underscore complex legal questions concerning their legitimacy, limits, enforceability, and long-term legal consequences (17, 18).

From the standpoint of international law, a detailed examination of sanctions against Iran in the nuclear context is essential not only for technical legal analysis but also for understanding their broader political, security, and humanitarian ramifications. In practice, sanctions aimed at constraining Iran's nuclear program have inflicted direct and indirect harm on economic infrastructure, scientific development, and even public health and daily life. Such

outcomes appear difficult to reconcile with fundamental principles of international law, including proportionality, the right to development, non-intervention, and respect for human dignity (19, 20).

This situation becomes particularly problematic when sanctions are justified through human rights discourse yet result in widespread violations of basic economic and social rights. Consequently, a reassessment of the concept of sanctions' legitimacy is required. By focusing on nuclear issues, this study enables a deeper analysis of the intersection between non-proliferation law, the right to peaceful nuclear energy, and international legal regimes such as the NPT and IAEA safeguards system (21, 22). The persistent tension between Iran's rights as an NPT member to access the full nuclear fuel cycle and the security concerns articulated by other international actors poses significant challenges for interpreting treaty obligations, good faith in treaty performance, and the lawful scope of international pressure (23, 24).

The significance of this research also lies in the fact that sanctions imposed on Iran have developed into a distinctive and arguably unprecedented model in international law, blending legal, economic, and political mechanisms while blurring the boundary between measures authorized under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and actions that exceed established legal norms (25, 26). Moreover, the domestic consequences of sanctions in Iran—particularly restrictions affecting access to medicine, healthcare, education, and development—raise the prospect of international responsibility and accountability for sanctioning states or institutions, an issue that remains underexplored in existing scholarship (27, 28).

Within this framework, a legal analysis of sanctions against Iran offers an opportunity to evaluate both the effectiveness of contemporary international law in managing political, security, and scientific disputes and the structural limitations international law faces when confronted with dominant political will. It also provides a basis for considering alternative legal and institutional approaches to nuclear disputes and for reassessing the architecture of international sanctions in light of principles of justice, equity, and sustainable development (29, 30).

Overall, international sanctions against Iran, first imposed in the late 1970s and progressively expanded, have profoundly affected Iran's economy and nuclear program. The legality of these sanctions remains a contested issue among international legal scholars and practitioners (31, 32). A clear distinction must therefore be drawn between binding sanctions adopted by the Security Council and unilateral or secondary sanctions that lack broad international legitimacy. Although certain suspension or mitigation measures were introduced under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the re-imposition of secondary sanctions and the coercion of international economic actors to comply with restrictions on Iran have introduced a new dimension of transnational pressure and control (33, 34).

Accordingly, this research adopts a legal, analytical, and critical approach to clarify the status and legitimacy of sanctions imposed on Iran under international law. The central research question is: What is the status of economic sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran in relation to its nuclear program from the perspective of international law? Addressing this question requires a systematic examination of the legal foundations of sanctions, their compatibility with international law principles, and their consequences for Iran's nuclear activities.

This study also addresses the following subsidiary questions:

- Are international sanctions against Iran founded upon international law?
- Do these sanctions conflict with principles of international law, including sovereign equality, non-intervention in nuclear affairs, and human rights?
- Have international sanctions against Iran produced nuclear-related consequences?

The aim of this research is to examine international sanctions against Iran from the perspective of international law, with a particular emphasis on nuclear issues, and to determine whether these sanctions have affected Iran's nuclear program in a manner consistent with international legal principles and regulations.

Research Background

Eshaghi et al. (2025) conducted a study entitled *"International Sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran from the Perspective of International Law with Emphasis on Nuclear Issues."* The aim of this research was to examine and analyze the international sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of international law, with particular attention to nuclear-related dimensions. The central research question focused on the extent to which these sanctions are consistent with the fundamental principles and norms of international law and on their consequences for Iran's political position and legal status in the international system. The study adopted a descriptive–analytical methodology and relied on documentary and library-based data. In this framework, international instruments, multilateral treaties, United Nations Security Council resolutions, as well as selected judicial decisions and legal precedents were examined. Through a comparative approach, the legitimacy and effectiveness of sanctions from an international legal perspective were assessed.

The findings of this study indicate that sanctions against Iran have a long historical trajectory, beginning in 1979 and gradually expanding to encompass economic, financial, and commercial sectors. While the United Nations Charter recognizes the legitimacy of sanctions only within specific legal frameworks, many unilateral measures imposed by the United States against Iran appear to be predominantly political rather than legal in character (13, 18). At the same time, despite Iran's pursuit of nuclear activities within the framework of peaceful use and in accordance with rights granted under the NPT, it has remained subject to extensive sanctions. This situation has generated deep disagreements among states and international legal scholars regarding the legality and legitimacy of such measures (3, 4). Overall, the findings contribute to a clearer understanding of the legal and political dimensions of sanctions and offer a basis for more accurate and informed policymaking.

Shayanfar (2023) carried out a study entitled *"Sanctions and Human Rights Violations from the Perspective of International Law (with Emphasis on Unilateral Sanctions against Iran)."* Following the end of the Cold War, the United Nations Security Council increasingly resorted to sanctions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter as a means of exerting pressure on states. Experiences of sanctioned countries demonstrate that the most severe consequences of sanctions are borne by ordinary citizens, often resulting in serious violations of fundamental human rights (19, 20). In international relations, sanctions are commonly viewed as instruments designed to compel states to modify their behavior or abandon contested policies; however, when such measures exceed the limits imposed by international law and human rights norms, their legal credibility is undermined and they may amount to internationally wrongful acts (2).

This study sought to analyze the effects and consequences of unilateral sanctions against Iran and to demonstrate how such measures can lead to direct or indirect violations of human rights. Hostile policies pursued by the United States against the Islamic Republic of Iran since the early post-revolutionary period represent a prominent example of unilateral sanctions with extensive social and economic repercussions (35). In addition, collective sanctions adopted by the Security Council against certain states have produced comparable outcomes, inflicting significant harm on basic human rights. From an international legal perspective, the imposition of such sanctions faces serious legitimacy challenges, as they may conflict with human rights obligations and exceed the

authority envisaged under the UN Charter (11, 12). These practices potentially generate international responsibility for the sanctioning bodies and raise broader concerns regarding the humanitarian and legal consequences of sanctions.

Zangi Ahromi et al. (2021) conducted a study titled *“The Effects of Unilateral Sanctions on Human Rights, with Emphasis on U.S. Sanctions against Iran.”* The study emphasized that unilateral sanctions are predominantly imposed by major powers, and even when their illegitimacy is widely acknowledged, meaningful policy change by sanctioning states is rarely observed. Using a descriptive–analytical approach and relying on documentary and library sources, the research examined the human rights impacts of unilateral sanctions and proposed practical mechanisms to mitigate their adverse effects. These measures were presented not only as relevant for targeted states but also as part of a shared international responsibility to safeguard fundamental human rights.

Research Foundations

Sanctions constitute one of the most significant instruments of international policymaking and play a central role in regulating relations among states. In general terms, sanctions refer to a set of restrictive and punitive measures imposed by one or more states or international organizations against a particular country, group, or individual in order to induce changes in specific behaviors or policies (22). This definition underscores both the coercive dimension of sanctions and their intended purpose of behavior modification, highlighting their importance within the international system.

For a more precise conceptualization, it is necessary to distinguish sanctions from related notions such as countermeasures and coercive actions. Countermeasures, often described as lawful reprisals, are responses taken within the framework of international law and without recourse to force against a state that has committed an internationally wrongful act (36). By contrast, coercive actions typically involve the use or threat of force and are frequently military or police in nature. Sanctions, by comparison, mainly encompass economic, trade, financial, or political restrictions aimed at exerting indirect pressure while remaining, at least in principle, within the bounds of international law (37).

From a legal standpoint, the United Nations Charter represents the primary instrument governing the legitimacy of sanctions. Articles 39, 41, and 42 authorize the Security Council to determine the existence of threats to international peace and security and to adopt non-military or, if necessary, military measures in response (9, 11). Article 39 requires an initial determination of a threat, breach of peace, or act of aggression; Article 41 provides for non-military measures such as economic and diplomatic sanctions; and Article 42 permits the use of force if non-military measures prove inadequate. This framework establishes the Security Council as the sole body empowered to impose binding multilateral sanctions under international law (25).

In contrast, unilateral sanctions imposed without Security Council authorization remain highly controversial. Such measures are frequently viewed as violations of the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention and are often criticized for lacking sufficient legal legitimacy (13). In some instances, international legal institutions and courts have characterized unilateral sanctions as unlawful acts. Moreover, attempts by certain states to justify such measures through formal legal arguments—sometimes described as “pseudo-legal sanctions”—pose serious challenges to the coherence and stability of the international legal order and demand careful legal scrutiny (38).

It should also be emphasized that sanctions are not merely instruments of restriction; they are often presented as tools for achieving broader international policy objectives, including the maintenance of international peace and

security. Consequently, legal analysis of sanctions must address not only their objectives and formal legal bases but also issues of legitimacy, compliance with human rights standards, and unintended humanitarian consequences (1). A clear understanding of the concept and legal foundations of sanctions is therefore essential for evaluating their legitimacy at the international level, particularly in the context of the present study on sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Such an understanding can contribute to a more rigorous legal assessment of sanctions and to the development of appropriate legal strategies for responding to and managing their effects.

The Role of Sanctions in International Relations

In recent decades, sanctions have become one of the most significant instruments of foreign policy and international legal enforcement. As an alternative to the use of military force, sanctions perform a dual function in international relations: on the one hand, they operate as tools of political and economic pressure aimed at changing the behavior of states and other international actors; on the other hand, they function as legal mechanisms intended to enforce international decisions, preserve peace, prevent serious violations, and, in some cases, promote compliance with human rights obligations (1, 2). Owing to their non-military and ostensibly peaceful character, sanctions have consistently occupied a fragile position between legality and the potential violation of fundamental principles of international law. Accordingly, any analysis of their role in the contemporary legal order must carefully assess their impact on state sovereignty, non-intervention, sovereign equality, human rights, and the peaceful settlement of international disputes (9, 10).

1. Sanctions as a Tool of Soft Power

Within the contemporary international legal order, sanctions are widely understood as a form of indirect or soft power. Unlike armed conflict or military occupation, sanctions rely primarily on economic, financial, and technological leverage, as well as control over international networks of trade, banking, transportation, and communication, to compel target states to comply with external demands. This feature allows sanctions to operate simultaneously as instruments of political pressure and as mechanisms of legal discipline within the framework of international law (15, 16).

2. Sanctions and the Concept of International Order

One of the most critical issues surrounding sanctions concerns their place within the international legal order and their broader impact on the global system. The contemporary international order is founded on the principles of the United Nations Charter, respect for state sovereignty, and the prohibition of the use of force. Sanctions adopted pursuant to Security Council decisions under Chapter VII of the Charter can, in principle, reinforce this order by deterring violations and enhancing state accountability for breaches of international obligations (11, 25). By contrast, unilateral sanctions—particularly those imposed by major powers without Security Council authorization—pose serious challenges to the international legal order. Such measures often lack clear legal standards and are widely regarded as violations of the principles of non-intervention and sovereign equality, as well as unlawful deprivations of rights and benefits guaranteed under international law (13, 35).

3. Sanctions and the Redefinition of International Responsibility

Sanctions have also contributed to a reconfiguration of the concept of international responsibility in contemporary international law. Traditionally, responses to internationally wrongful acts were largely confined to judicial or arbitral mechanisms and, in limited cases, narrowly defined countermeasures. In the modern era, sanctions have emerged as rapid and operational responses to serious violations such as aggression, large-scale human rights abuses, or

threats to international peace and security. Following the Gulf War, Security Council–mandated sanctions increasingly functioned as tools to compel compliance with international obligations, effectively operating as enforcement mechanisms for international responsibility (12, 26).

4. Sanctions and the Legal Accountability of Major Powers

From a critical standpoint, sanctions have also accentuated the problem of selectivity in the enforcement of international law. When powerful states employ sanctions primarily to advance national interests or to exert control over non-aligned states, concerns arise that core principles of the international legal order—such as sovereign equality, the non-instrumental use of legal tools, and the impartiality of legal mechanisms—are being compromised. Unilateral sanctions imposed without Security Council authorization by states such as the United States exemplify this tendency and have contributed to perceptions of an increasingly selective and hierarchical international order (18, 29). These concerns have prompted calls, particularly from developing states, for greater scrutiny of sanctions decision-making processes and enhanced accountability for sanctioning powers.

Sanctions and Their Impact on Human Rights and Global Justice

Despite their declared legal and humanitarian objectives, sanctions have frequently resulted in serious violations of fundamental human rights. Broad and comprehensive sanctions—especially those affecting medicine, food, healthcare, transportation, and financial systems—have been associated with increased mortality, declining social welfare, and widening inequalities within target states. Studies and reports emphasize that non-targeted sanctions tend to disproportionately affect ordinary civilians rather than political elites or decision-makers responsible for alleged violations (19, 20). From the perspective of global justice, this outcome represents a profound challenge, as sanctions intended to promote legality and justice may instead function as instruments of structural injustice in the international system (1).

Within the specific context of Iran's nuclear file, the legal framework governing United Nations Security Council sanctions and their human rights implications constitutes a particularly complex issue in international law. Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the Security Council is empowered to impose sanctions to maintain or restore international peace and security. In the case of Iran, these measures have included economic, trade, financial, and arms restrictions designed to ensure compliance with nuclear-related obligations. Nevertheless, such sanctions must conform to fundamental principles of international law, including proportionality, non-discrimination, and respect for human rights—especially where their effects extend to the daily lives of civilians (9, 11).

In practice, however, critics argue that sanctions have significantly worsened living conditions for Iranian citizens and have adversely affected a wide range of human rights, including the right to health, access to essential medicines, education, and an adequate standard of living. Independent legal and humanitarian analyses have repeatedly warned about the collateral and humanitarian consequences of sanctions regimes. Consequently, Security Council sanctions must strike a careful balance between safeguarding international security and protecting fundamental human rights, with particular attention to their indirect and long-term effects on civilian populations (27, 39).

In sum, sanctions represent one of the most complex and contested instruments of the contemporary international legal order. When designed and implemented in a lawful, proportionate, and transparent manner, they may contribute to the maintenance of peace, the prevention of serious violations, and the enforcement of international responsibility. However, when employed unilaterally, instrumentally, or without effective oversight,

sanctions risk undermining the foundations of international law, eroding the principle of sovereign equality, and generating widespread human rights violations. Accordingly, strengthening monitoring mechanisms, enhancing transparency in sanctions regimes, and reinforcing accountability for sanctioning authorities remain essential prerequisites for aligning the practice of sanctions with the core values of the international legal order.

Legal Foundations for the Legitimacy of Sanctions

United Nations Charter: Articles 39, 41, and 42

In the contemporary international legal order, sanctions are considered legitimate only when they are imposed within the framework of binding international instruments and by authorities endowed with legal competence. Within the United Nations system, the UN Charter—particularly Chapter VII—constitutes the principal legal basis for identifying threats to international peace and security and for determining appropriate collective responses. Articles 39, 41, and 42 of the Charter are therefore regarded as the core pillars underpinning the legal legitimacy of sanctions (9, 11).

1. Article 39: Identification of Threats to Peace

The initial step in the imposition of sanctions by the Security Council is grounded in Article 39 of the UN Charter. Under this provision, the Council must determine the existence of a threat to the peace, a breach of the peace, or an act of aggression and decide upon measures necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security. From a legal perspective, Article 39 constitutes the foundation of all binding actions adopted by the Security Council (25). In practice, before sanctions are imposed, the Council formally characterizes a given situation as a threat to peace and invokes Article 39 as the legal basis for intervention, thereby initiating the adoption of binding resolutions irrespective of the consent of the target state.

It should be emphasized that the determination of a “threat to peace” is a political–legal assessment that lies within the exclusive competence of the Security Council. No judicial or quasi-judicial organ of the United Nations is empowered to annul or substitute this determination, although such decisions may be subject to doctrinal critique and legal analysis within international law scholarship.

2. Article 41: Implementation of Non-Military Measures (Sanctions)

Article 41 of the UN Charter provides the primary legal basis for the legitimacy of non-military sanctions. It authorizes the Security Council to decide upon measures not involving the use of armed force in order to give effect to its decisions. These measures include economic and financial restrictions, limitations on trade and transportation, suspension of diplomatic relations, and other forms of non-military pressure. Sanctions such as asset freezes, import and export bans, travel restrictions, and the suspension of financial transactions fall squarely within the scope of Article 41.

The legal legitimacy of sanctions adopted under Article 41 is conditional upon several cumulative requirements: first, the sanctions must be adopted by the Security Council itself; second, they must be preceded by a determination under Article 39 that the situation constitutes a threat to international peace and security; and third, they must remain consistent with the purposes and principles of the Charter, as well as with general principles of international law, including proportionality and necessity (12, 26). Sanctions imposed outside this framework—most notably unilateral measures adopted by individual states—lack a basis in the UN Charter and therefore suffer from a deficit of international legal legitimacy (13, 35).

3. Article 42: Use of Military Force Following the Failure of Sanctions

Article 42 of the UN Charter authorizes the Security Council to adopt military or quasi-military measures when it determines that non-military measures under Article 41 have proven inadequate. This provision illustrates the graduated structure of Security Council responses, in which sanctions constitute a preventive and coercive step preceding the possible authorization of force as a measure of last resort (11). From a legal standpoint, Article 42 underscores that sanctions are intended primarily as deterrent and non-violent instruments designed to prevent escalation and avoid armed conflict.

A crucial limitation inherent in Article 42 is that the use of force is permissible only after the Security Council has explicitly determined the insufficiency of non-military measures. Any resort to force absent such a determination lacks legal legitimacy and constitutes a violation of the Charter. Consequently, the overall legality of sanctions within the UN system derives directly from Chapter VII—particularly Articles 39, 41, and 42—and from the structured sequence they establish (9).

Unilateral Sanctions and the Limits of Legitimacy under International Law

Any sanction imposed without a prior determination of a threat to peace by the Security Council, or without its authorization, cannot be regarded as a lawful international sanction under the UN Charter. Such measures may amount to violations of fundamental Charter principles, including the prohibition of intervention in the internal affairs of states and respect for state sovereignty. This issue is particularly salient with respect to unilateral sanctions, many of which are implemented as ostensibly lawful coercive measures despite lacking a clear legal basis in the Charter—often described in legal doctrine as “pseudo-legal sanctions” (2, 18).

In evaluating the legitimacy of unilateral sanctions, international judicial and quasi-judicial practice plays an important role in clarifying the applicable legal limits. Although not all judicial pronouncements directly address sanctions, international jurisprudence consistently emphasizes that states remain bound by international human rights obligations even in exceptional circumstances. This principle is especially relevant where sanctions impede access to essential humanitarian goods or services. From the perspective of international law, measures that obstruct access to medicine, healthcare, food, or basic economic resources are difficult to reconcile with states’ human rights obligations (19, 20).

Under customary international law, the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of states constitutes a binding norm of the international legal order. Unilateral sanctions that seek to coerce states into altering their internal or external policies through severe economic pressure, absent collective authorization, therefore raise serious concerns regarding their compatibility with this principle (10, 30). Moreover, transnational legal practice has increasingly conditioned the legitimacy of sanctions on respect for fundamental rights, reinforcing the view that even collectively authorized measures must remain subject to human rights constraints (27).

Criteria for the Legitimacy of International Sanctions

Based on international legal doctrine and practice, the principal criteria delimiting the legitimacy of sanctions—particularly unilateral sanctions—may be summarized as follows:

1. Sanctions must not result in direct or indirect violations of fundamental human rights, including the rights to health, education, food, employment, and development (19).

2. Sanctions must be consistent with the UN Charter and with customary international law, particularly the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention (9, 10).
3. Sanctions must be proportionate, transparent, and subject to effective monitoring in order to prevent excessive or unintended harm to civilian populations (1).
4. Humanitarian exemptions and compensatory mechanisms must be genuine, practical, and operational rather than merely symbolic (27).

In conclusion, contemporary international practice demonstrates that unilateral sanctions causing widespread human suffering lack both moral and legal legitimacy. Such measures undermine fundamental norms of international law, including respect for human dignity and the prohibition of collective punishment. This conclusion provides a solid legal foundation for challenging the legality of unilateral sanctions before international courts and human rights bodies and for advocating a more restrained and law-based approach to the use of sanctions in international relations.

Discussion

Legitimacy of Sanctions under the UN Charter

Assessing the legitimacy of nuclear-related sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic of Iran must begin with the United Nations Charter, which constitutes the central legal framework governing international relations and the lawful use of sanctions. Under the Charter—particularly Articles 39 and 41—the Security Council is empowered to adopt measures, including economic sanctions and other non-military actions, when it determines the existence of a threat to international peace and security (9, 11). Accordingly, the Council is required to identify, in a legally defensible manner, the existence of such a threat prior to the imposition of sanctions.

In the context of Iran's nuclear file, a key legal controversy concerns the characterization of Iran's nuclear activities as a "threat to peace." Certain Security Council members and Western states have argued that the potential military dimension of Iran's nuclear program could endanger international peace and thus justify sanctions (40). However, this position is contested on legal grounds, as the Charter entrusts the identification of threats to peace exclusively to the Security Council, while simultaneously requiring that such determinations be grounded in objective legal assessments rather than political speculation. A substantial body of legal scholarship maintains that nuclear activities conducted within the framework of international treaties and monitoring mechanisms cannot, in themselves, constitute a threat to peace (3, 4).

Moreover, Article 41 of the UN Charter makes clear that sanctions must be designed to maintain or restore international peace and security and must remain proportionate to that objective (9). Sanctions that impose sweeping economic and social burdens on civilian populations risk contravening fundamental principles of international law and human rights. Numerous legal analyses emphasize that comprehensive economic sanctions adopted without adequate consideration of humanitarian consequences or the protection of basic rights violate the principles of proportionality and necessity, thereby undermining their legal legitimacy (19, 20). In addition, customary international law requires good faith in the performance of international obligations, a requirement that sanctions regimes must satisfy in order to be considered lawful (10).

Finally, sanctions must not unjustifiably interfere with a state's sovereign rights, including the right to pursue peaceful nuclear technology. Any legal evaluation of sanctions against Iran must therefore consider whether such

measures unlawfully restrict rights recognized under international law, particularly those arising from treaty obligations and customary norms. A comprehensive assessment under both the UN Charter and customary international law is thus essential to determining the legitimacy or illegitimacy of Iran-related sanctions (22, 30).

Assessment of Threats to Peace

Identifying Threats to Peace and Their Relevance to Iran

In examining the relevance of various forms of threats to peace in relation to Iran's nuclear program, it is first necessary to consider the process by which the Security Council identifies such threats. The UN Charter assigns the Council exclusive authority to determine the existence of a threat to peace and to decide on appropriate measures, including sanctions (25). Nevertheless, this determination frequently involves legal and political complexities, reflecting divergent interpretations of what constitutes a genuine threat to international peace.

In situations involving armed aggression or explicit support for terrorist activities, the identification of threats to peace is generally more straightforward and enjoys broader international consensus. Iran's nuclear case, by contrast, arises within a far more complex legal and political context, shaped by non-proliferation law, security considerations, and geopolitical rivalries (17). As a party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Iran is legally bound not to acquire nuclear weapons while retaining the right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. This right is widely recognized in international law and has been affirmed by numerous legal commentators (5, 6). Nonetheless, concerns expressed by certain states have largely been based on speculative assumptions regarding potential diversion of Iran's nuclear program toward military ends, rather than on conclusive legal evidence (30).

These uncertainties contributed to the adoption of Security Council resolutions such as 1737 and 1929, which imposed extensive sanctions on Iran. Critics argue that these measures exceeded the limits of the Charter's legitimacy and unlawfully restricted Iran's rights under international law (24). Comparative analysis with other cases—including North Korea and Iraq—suggests that Security Council responses to nuclear-related concerns often depend on the perceived level of cooperation with monitoring bodies such as the International Atomic Energy Agency. Although Iran has engaged in varying degrees of cooperation, allegations of insufficient transparency have prompted the adoption of increasingly restrictive measures, leading many scholars to question their legal justification (12).

From a human rights perspective, sanctions imposed under the pretext of addressing threats to peace must not result in harm to civilian populations or violations of fundamental rights. Reports and legal studies consistently demonstrate that punitive economic sanctions can impede access to medicine, healthcare, and basic necessities, thereby violating international human rights obligations (19, 20). Similar consequences have been documented in the Iranian case, further complicating the legal and ethical evaluation of nuclear-related sanctions (27).

Ultimately, aligning the identification of threats to peace with the specific realities of Iran's nuclear program requires an evidence-based and legally rigorous approach. Such an assessment must integrate treaty obligations, verification mechanisms, and the humanitarian impact of sanctions in order to prevent the political misuse of legal concepts and to uphold the principles of international justice (1, 23).

Legal Implications and Challenges in Identifying Threats to Peace

The determination of a threat to peace by the Security Council carries profound legal implications, as clearly illustrated by the nuclear sanctions imposed on Iran. Legally, such a determination serves as the gateway to sanctions and other coercive measures, which must remain consistent with the UN Charter and general principles of international law (9). Owing to its inherently political–legal character, this process is vulnerable to misuse and may give rise to serious questions regarding the legitimacy of resulting sanctions (2).

One of the principal legal challenges lies in reconciling international security objectives with respect for the rights of states and their populations. Broad economic sanctions adopted following a determination of a threat to peace can have devastating effects on civilians, particularly in the areas of health, employment, and access to essential goods. In the Iranian context, this tension between security concerns and human rights obligations has become especially pronounced, given the severity and duration of the sanctions regime (19, 20). Ensuring proportionality and necessity in sanctions is therefore indispensable, as failure to observe these principles erodes their legal validity.

Furthermore, the political and legal consequences of identifying a threat to peace include heightened international tensions, weakened multilateral diplomacy, and increased polarization within the international system. In Iran's case, the Security Council's determination led to extensive economic and political sanctions that not only affected diplomatic relations but also complicated negotiation processes. As a result, many legal scholars have called for a reassessment of the criteria used to define threats to peace and for greater transparency in Security Council decision-making (25, 26).

In sum, these challenges underscore the need for clearer legal standards and more precise criteria governing the imposition of sanctions. Emphasizing respect for human rights, state sovereignty, and the rule of law in the identification of threats to peace is essential to preserving both the legal and political legitimacy of sanctions. This consideration is particularly critical in the Iranian case, where maintaining an appropriate balance between global security and the protection of state and civilian rights remains a central concern of contemporary international law (10, 30).

Interpretive Analysis of the UN Charter Provisions on Sanctions

The Role of Article 41 of the UN Charter in Establishing the Legal Framework for Sanctions

Article 41 of the United Nations Charter occupies a central position in defining the legal framework governing the imposition of sanctions and is widely regarded as one of the principal foundations of non-military coercive measures in international law. This provision authorizes the Security Council, in situations involving threats to peace, breaches of the peace, or acts of aggression, to adopt non-military measures such as economic and financial sanctions, the severance of diplomatic relations, and restrictions on communications and transportation in order to maintain or restore international peace and security (9). In this sense, Article 41 establishes a clear legal basis for sanctions and situates them firmly within the normative structure of international law.

This framework reflects the graduated approach embedded in the Charter, according to which sanctions function as an intermediate response prior to any potential recourse to force. Article 42 confirms that military measures may be considered only when non-military measures under Article 41 have proven insufficient, thereby underscoring the priority accorded to peaceful and low-risk instruments for addressing international crises (11). Such an approach

highlights the Charter's underlying objective of safeguarding international peace and security while minimizing human suffering and respecting human dignity.

A further interpretive element of Article 41 concerns the principles of proportionality and necessity in the design and implementation of sanctions. Sanctions must be limited to what is required to neutralize the identified threat and must not operate as instruments of collective punishment or illegitimate pressure against civilian populations or sovereign states (1). Where sanctions result in unjustified restrictions on access to essential goods, medicine, or healthcare, their legal legitimacy is seriously undermined and they may provoke international legal and moral condemnation (19, 20).

In addition, Article 41 implicitly requires continuous oversight by the Security Council with respect to both the effectiveness and the humanitarian impact of sanctions. This obligation entails periodic review, adjustment, or termination of sanctions where circumstances evolve or where objectives have been achieved. Sanctions are therefore intended to be temporary, targeted, and goal-oriented rather than permanent mechanisms of political or economic coercion (26). In the context of nuclear-related sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran, a sound interpretation of Article 41 is essential for evaluating both their legal validity and their broader consequences, ensuring that such measures do not exceed legal or humanitarian limits (9).

Limitations and Conditions for Sanctions under the Charter: Balancing Security and Human Rights

The exercise of sanctioning powers under the UN Charter is subject to important legal limitations designed to preserve a balance between the maintenance of international security and the protection of human rights. Articles 39 and 41 require the Security Council, once a threat to peace has been identified, to adopt non-military measures in a manner consistent with the purposes and principles of the Charter (11). These provisions implicitly mandate respect for human dignity and fundamental rights, prohibiting sanctions that cause disproportionate harm to civilian populations.

The principle of proportionality is particularly significant in this regard, requiring that the scope and intensity of sanctions correspond to the gravity of the threat and avoid unnecessary harm to innocent individuals. Experience in international practice demonstrates that broad economic sanctions often generate severe humanitarian consequences, including reduced access to essential medicines, deterioration of healthcare systems, increased poverty, and widespread social hardship. Such effects amount to indirect violations of economic and social rights and have been repeatedly highlighted in legal and human rights analyses (19, 20). These concerns underscore the necessity of reviewing and recalibrating sanctions when they produce extensive humanitarian harm.

Moreover, international law prohibits the use of sanctions as instruments of unjust political pressure or collective punishment. Sanctions that indiscriminately target entire populations risk undermining international cooperation, eroding trust among states, and obstructing diplomatic solutions (10, 30). Consequently, the Security Council bears a continuing responsibility to assess the social and humanitarian consequences of sanctions and to ensure transparency and accountability in their implementation.

The establishment of protective mechanisms to mitigate the adverse effects of sanctions—particularly in sensitive sectors such as medicine and public health—is another critical legal requirement. Humanitarian exemptions and effective channels for the provision of essential goods are indispensable for preserving the legal and ethical legitimacy of sanctions regimes (27). Compliance with these safeguards not only alleviates human suffering but also reduces the risk of legal challenges and reputational damage to the sanctioning authority.

In sum, the limitations and conditions articulated in the UN Charter reflect a careful attempt to balance global security imperatives with the protection of human rights. Achieving this balance requires continuous oversight, regular review, and transparent implementation mechanisms. In the specific case of nuclear sanctions against Iran, close attention to these constraints is essential to ensure both justice and legal legitimacy in the operation of sanctions (1, 26).

Legal Challenges Arising from the Interpretation of Iran's Obligations and the Basis of Security Council Sanctions

The interpretation of Iran's international obligations and the legal basis for Security Council sanctions constitutes one of the most contentious issues at the intersection of international law, security, and global politics. At the core of this debate lies the interpretation of Iran's commitments under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Iran maintains that its uranium enrichment activities fall within its recognized right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy and that it has complied with its safeguards obligations (5, 6). Conversely, some states—most notably the United States—have adopted a more restrictive interpretation, characterizing these activities as inherently threatening and advocating sanctions (18).

A major legal challenge arises from divergent readings of the NPT. While Article IV affirms the right of member states to peaceful nuclear technology, other provisions emphasize transparency and effective international monitoring. Disagreement over whether uranium enrichment constitutes a lawful exercise of rights or a deviation from treaty obligations has rendered the legal foundation of sanctions highly controversial. Many legal commentators argue that Security Council sanctions imposed between 2006 and 2010 were driven more by political and security considerations than by concrete evidence of treaty violations (4, 24).

A further challenge concerns the reliance on Chapter VII of the UN Charter to justify sanctions. Article 39 authorizes intervention only upon the identification of an actual threat to international peace and security. In Iran's case, the asserted threat was largely based on suspicion or the possibility of future diversion rather than demonstrable acts of aggression. From an international law perspective, sanctions grounded in speculative assessments raise serious concerns regarding legality, as they conflict with the principles of proportionality, necessity, and good faith (2, 10).

The breadth and intensity of sanctions imposed on Iran also present significant legal difficulties. Many measures extended far beyond the nuclear sector to encompass banking, transportation, healthcare, and other essential areas of civilian life. This expansion transformed sanctions from targeted nuclear-related tools into mechanisms that undermined Iran's broader economic and social structure. From a human rights standpoint, such comprehensive measures resemble collective punishment and are difficult to reconcile with fundamental principles of international law (19, 20). Moreover, these practices appear inconsistent with the cooperative spirit of the NPT, which seeks to promote collaboration in the peaceful use of nuclear energy rather than economic isolation (22).

Finally, divisions within the Security Council itself—particularly criticisms by states such as Russia and China regarding the scope and intensity of sanctions—have further weakened perceptions of legitimacy. These disagreements highlight deficiencies in decision-making processes and contribute to doubts about the neutrality and fairness of sanctions regimes (25).

In conclusion, conflicting interpretations of treaty obligations, the politicization of legal concepts, and insufficient reliance on graduated dispute-settlement mechanisms have rendered sanctions against Iran a paradigmatic example of the tension between law and politics in international relations. This tension undermines the perceived

legitimacy of Security Council actions, especially from the perspective of developing states, and underscores the urgent need for more consistent, transparent, and law-based approaches to sanctions within the contemporary international legal order.

Legal and Judicial Implications of Sanctions

International sanctions—particularly those imposed under the pretext of nuclear concerns against the Islamic Republic of Iran—have produced far-reaching consequences for the structure of international law and the global judicial order. When such sanctions are applied unilaterally, outside the collective framework of the United Nations Security Council and without due regard for fundamental principles of international law, they transcend their political or economic function and directly challenge the legitimacy and coherence of international legal norms (2, 18). These measures not only undermine state sovereignty but also generate serious implications for human rights law, treaty law, and the general principles governing international responsibility.

From a human rights perspective, one of the most visible consequences of sanctions has been the infringement of the rights to life, health, and an adequate standard of living of Iranian citizens. Although sanctioning states frequently claim that restrictive measures are narrowly targeted at governmental entities, extensive legal and humanitarian analyses demonstrate that sanctions—particularly those affecting banking, financial transfers, and pharmaceuticals—have had direct and tangible effects on ordinary civilians (19, 20). Disruptions in the importation of essential medicines, reduced access to advanced medical equipment, and obstacles to the development of healthcare infrastructure illustrate how sanctions translate into concrete human suffering.

Beyond health-related harms, sanctions have also resulted in violations of economic, social, and cultural rights. Under international human rights law, states are required to respect principles of international cooperation and to refrain from actions that obstruct the development of other states. In practice, however, sanctions targeting Iran's economic structure have adversely affected scientific research, technological development, and academic cooperation. Restrictions on financial transactions, limitations on access to international scientific resources, and impediments to technology transfer are indicative of broader infringements on the right to development and the freedom of scientific cooperation (1, 27).

From the standpoint of treaty law, unilateral sanctions imposed following the withdrawal of the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) raise serious legal concerns in relation to the principle of *pacta sunt servanda*. International law requires treaties to be performed in good faith, and the unilateral re-imposition of sanctions after the suspension of obligations under a multilateral agreement undermines this foundational principle (4, 10). Moreover, the imposition of secondary sanctions on third-party states and companies engaging in lawful relations with Iran constitutes an infringement of territorial sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention, as it effectively extends the domestic jurisdiction of one state beyond its borders (13, 14).

Judicial Implications

The legal consequences of sanctions have also manifested in the judicial arena. Following the re-imposition of U.S. sanctions, Iran initiated proceedings before the International Court of Justice based on alleged violations of the 1955 Treaty of Amity. In its 2018 order on provisional measures, the Court emphasized that measures restricting access to humanitarian goods—such as food, medicine, and aircraft safety equipment—must not impede fundamental human rights. Although provisional in nature, this decision signaled an important development in

international law by affirming that unilateral sanctions producing humanitarian harm may be subject to international judicial scrutiny (1).

In parallel, United Nations human rights mechanisms, including reports by Special Rapporteurs on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures, have repeatedly drawn attention to the adverse humanitarian consequences of sanctions against Iran. These reports underscore that sanctions often exceed their stated political objectives and generate widespread human rights violations, reinforcing the argument that their legality must be assessed not only through a security lens but also through human rights law (19, 20).

At a structural level, the continuation of sanctions despite international agreements such as the JCPOA has weakened confidence in the international legal system and eroded trust in multilateral dispute-settlement mechanisms. The selective implementation of treaty obligations by major powers and the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms have contributed to perceptions of double standards within international law. This dynamic poses a serious challenge to the principle of sovereign equality of states and threatens the stability and credibility of the global legal order (29, 30).

In sum, the legal and judicial implications of sanctions against Iran extend far beyond economic or diplomatic pressure. They strike at the core values of justice, equality, and legality in international law, revealing systemic weaknesses in the regulation of coercive measures. Addressing these challenges requires not only sustained legal action by affected states but also a renewed commitment by international institutions to develop impartial, binding, and human-rights-oriented frameworks governing the use of sanctions in contemporary international relations.

Principles and Norms of Customary International Law Related to Compliance with International Obligations

Compliance with international obligations constitutes a fundamental and non-derogable pillar of the international legal system. States are required to fulfill their international commitments in good faith and in their entirety. This obligation, commonly expressed through the principle of *pacta sunt servanda*, is recognized not only in treaty law but also as a binding rule of customary international law. Observance of this principle underpins mutual trust among states and ensures the stability and continuity of the international legal order (9, 10).

In customary international law, compliance is assessed from two interrelated perspectives: first, the proper performance of obligations in accordance with both the text and object of the relevant agreement; and second, the obligation to refrain from conduct that would frustrate or render ineffective the performance of obligations by other parties. Accordingly, states are not only bound to perform their commitments but must also avoid actions that impede reciprocal compliance. This understanding is embedded in the customary principle of good faith, which emphasizes fairness, equity, and integrity in international relations (1).

From a legal standpoint, states may not unilaterally withdraw from or suspend international obligations solely on the basis of shifting domestic priorities or national interests, unless such a right is expressly provided for in the relevant legal instrument. Unilateral withdrawal or non-performance without legally valid justification therefore constitutes a breach of customary international law and gives rise to international responsibility (2, 30). The principle of good faith governs state conduct throughout the entire lifecycle of international obligations, including negotiation, implementation, and dispute settlement, and serves to prevent abuse of rights and obligations in a manner detrimental to other states and to the credibility of the international legal system (10).

Closely related is the principle of reciprocity, which requires mutual and balanced adherence to international commitments. A breach by one party does not automatically entitle the other party to suspend or reduce its

obligations, except in accordance with established legal procedures and dispute-settlement mechanisms (1). Even in situations of disagreement or alleged non-compliance, states are required to act within the confines of international law and to avoid arbitrary or unilateral responses.

Another key norm of customary international law is the principle of international cooperation. This principle obliges states to cooperate in good faith to achieve the objectives of international agreements and to refrain from conduct that would obstruct their realization. In multilateral contexts, particularly within international organizations, unilateral withdrawal or violation of obligations without collective consent or lawful justification runs counter to this principle and undermines the cooperative foundations of the international legal order (9).

In sum, compliance with international obligations under customary international law rests on the combined operation of good faith, reciprocity, and constructive cooperation. Adherence to these norms promotes stability and predictability in international relations, while their violation not only entails legal responsibility but also erodes a state's credibility and legitimacy in the international system, with far-reaching political and economic consequences (30).

Impact of Sanctions on Human Rights and International Judicial Practices

Economic and financial sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly in connection with nuclear-related issues, have had profound implications not only at the political and economic levels but also in the realm of human rights. One of the most serious consequences of these sanctions has been the restriction of access to medicines, medical equipment, and healthcare services, directly endangering the right to health and, in some cases, the right to life. Legal and humanitarian analyses consistently demonstrate that unilateral and extraterritorial sanctions, although formally directed at state institutions, in practice inflict significant harm on ordinary civilians (19, 20).

From a human rights perspective, such sanctions are difficult to reconcile with core international norms protecting access to healthcare and essential services. International human rights law obliges states to ensure that their actions do not prevent individuals from accessing fundamental necessities. In the Iranian context, sanctions have contributed to shortages of vital medicines and medical equipment, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups such as patients with chronic illnesses, children, and the elderly (27). These outcomes have been repeatedly highlighted in reports and legal analyses addressing the humanitarian impact of sanctions.

International Judicial Practices Regarding Sanctions

International judicial practice has increasingly addressed the legality and humanitarian consequences of sanctions imposed on Iran. In proceedings before the International Court of Justice, Iran argued that unilateral economic sanctions violated international obligations and resulted in infringements of fundamental rights. In its 2018 order on provisional measures, the Court emphasized that sanctions must not impede access to humanitarian goods such as food, medicine, and aviation safety equipment. Although provisional in nature, this decision underscored the principle that unilateral sanctions producing humanitarian harm are subject to international judicial scrutiny (1).

In parallel, United Nations human rights mechanisms, including Special Rapporteurs addressing the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures, have repeatedly warned that sanctions often exceed their stated political objectives and generate serious humanitarian consequences. These interventions reflect a growing international

awareness that sanctions are not merely political instruments but also legal measures that must comply with human rights standards (19, 20).

Legal Analysis of Restrictions on Access to Medicines and Medical Equipment

Restrictions on access to medicines and medical equipment represent one of the most acute legal and humanitarian challenges arising from sanctions imposed on Iran. Financial and banking sanctions, coupled with the chilling effect of secondary sanctions, have significantly reduced the import of essential medical supplies by deterring foreign companies and financial institutions from engaging in lawful transactions. As a result, shortages of critical medicines and equipment have emerged in healthcare facilities, directly undermining the right to health (27).

Under international human rights law, sanctioning states are required to exercise due diligence to prevent measures that result in violations of fundamental rights. Sanctions that disrupt access to healthcare and essential medicines are inconsistent with obligations arising from international human rights norms and may entail international legal responsibility. The distinction between targeted sanctions and comprehensive economic sanctions is particularly relevant in this context: while targeted measures may limit harm, broad-based sanctions affecting entire economic systems tend to generate extensive and disproportionate human rights consequences (1).

International Responsibility of Sanctioning States for Human Rights Violations in Iran

The international responsibility of states imposing unilateral sanctions on Iran, particularly where such measures result in serious human rights violations, constitutes a central issue in contemporary international law. Under the law of state responsibility, a state that breaches an international obligation is required to make full reparation for the injury caused, including material and moral damage (2). Broad economic sanctions that restrict access to medicines, medical equipment, and other essential goods have caused substantial harm to fundamental rights, including the rights to life and health, thereby engaging the responsibility of sanctioning states under international law (19, 20).

In legal terms, sanctioning states bear an enhanced duty not only to comply with their own human rights obligations but also to ensure that their measures do not inflict unlawful harm on third-party populations. This responsibility derives from general principles of international law governing breaches of international obligations and the duty of reparation (10). Iran has repeatedly invoked these principles in international forums to challenge the legality of sanctions and to seek accountability for their humanitarian consequences.

International institutions and human rights mechanisms have consistently emphasized that sanctions must be implemented in accordance with good faith, respect for human dignity, and the prevention of unnecessary harm. The persistence of sanctions that cause widespread suffering underscores the need for legal remedies, compensation mechanisms, and preventive safeguards to address ongoing violations (1). Ultimately, the international responsibility of sanctioning states for human rights violations is not merely theoretical but reflects a concrete legal obligation that demands serious engagement by the international community to uphold justice, equality, and the rule of law in international relations.

Assessment of Violations of International Human Rights Treaties under Economic and Financial Sanctions

The evaluation of breaches of international human rights treaty obligations in the context of economic and financial sanctions has gained increasing prominence in recent years, particularly due to the expansion of unilateral sanctions imposed against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although sanctions are formally justified by political or security considerations, their practical effects extend deeply into the sphere of fundamental human rights, most notably the right to life, the right to health, and a broad range of economic, social, and cultural rights protected under international law (19, 20). Core international instruments obligate states to ensure non-discriminatory access to healthcare and essential services, yet sanctions have disrupted the import of medicines and medical equipment, imposed financial barriers to obtaining basic goods, and weakened healthcare systems. Such consequences amount to violations of the human rights obligations of sanctioning states under international law (27).

From a legal perspective, economic sanctions that disproportionately harm civilian populations—especially vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, and patients with chronic illnesses—contravene fundamental human rights principles, including human dignity, equality, and non-discrimination. International law imposes a duty on sanctioning states to ensure that their measures do not result in human rights violations; where such violations occur, states are required to adopt corrective measures and provide appropriate reparation (2). In this regard, repeated warnings issued by United Nations human rights mechanisms and Special Rapporteurs concerning the humanitarian impact of sanctions underscore the necessity of revising sanction regimes and aligning their implementation with binding human rights standards (19, 20). Ultimately, assessing treaty violations in the sanctions context requires a case-by-case legal analysis to identify the scope of harm and to design mechanisms for prevention, accountability, and reparation, which are essential for preserving the credibility of the international legal system (30).

Analysis of International Judicial Practices: Claims and Defenses in the ICJ Case between Iran and the United States

The legal dispute between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States before the International Court of Justice represents one of the most significant contemporary cases concerning unilateral sanctions and the withdrawal from international commitments. Iran's claims are grounded in allegations that the United States, by violating its international obligations and disregarding the principle of good faith, caused substantial legal and material harm (1). Good faith, as a cornerstone of international law, requires states to perform their obligations honestly and to refrain from conduct that undermines the rights and expectations of other parties.

Iran has argued that the unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA and the re-imposition of comprehensive sanctions constituted a clear breach of this principle, as well as of the broader obligation to respect international cooperation and stability (4). In response, the United States asserted that its actions fell within its sovereign discretion and were justified by national security considerations. However, such defenses have been widely criticized in legal scholarship, as sovereignty and security cannot serve as blanket justifications for non-compliance with binding international obligations. International law requires that exceptions to treaty performance be narrowly construed and exercised in good faith, particularly in agreements of significant political and security importance (2, 10).

From a legal standpoint, the ICJ proceedings demonstrate that Iran's arguments based on good faith, treaty compliance, and international responsibility possess a solid normative foundation. The unilateral withdrawal from commitments and the imposition of renewed sanctions without recourse to established dispute-resolution

mechanisms undermine the stability of international agreements and engage the international responsibility of the withdrawing state (30). This case therefore highlights the centrality of good faith and legal certainty in maintaining the integrity of international relations.

Legal Dimensions of the 2018 ICJ Provisional Measures on the Treaty of Amity and Their Impact on Sanctions

The provisional measures issued by the International Court of Justice in 2018 concerning the Treaty of Amity between Iran and the United States constituted a pivotal development in the legal scrutiny of unilateral sanctions. The Court reaffirmed the continuing validity of the Treaty and emphasized the binding nature of the parties' obligations, particularly with respect to humanitarian considerations and economic relations (1). By ordering the United States to ensure that sanctions did not impede access to humanitarian goods, the ICJ underscored the primacy of good faith and the protection of fundamental rights even in situations of political tension.

A key legal implication of these provisional measures was the clarification of the limits of economic sanctions and the supervisory role of international adjudication. The Court demonstrated that, through interim measures, it could preserve legal rights and prevent irreparable harm arising from sanctions that adversely affect economic and humanitarian interests (27). The ruling further emphasized that disputes between contracting states must be resolved through peaceful means and cooperative mechanisms, and that unilateral actions exacerbating tensions are incompatible with international law (10).

Overall, the 2018 ICJ decision added an important judicial dimension to the assessment of sanctions, confirming that unilateral measures must not unlawfully restrict the legitimate rights of the other party. It also opened avenues for future legal challenges and reinforced the role of international courts in safeguarding treaty obligations and humanitarian standards (30).

Legal Capacities and Challenges in Initiating New International Proceedings against Unilateral Sanctions

The initiation of new international legal proceedings to counter unilateral sanctions presents both significant opportunities and substantial challenges. On the one hand, international judicial and quasi-judicial mechanisms—such as the International Court of Justice, arbitral tribunals, and human rights bodies—offer sanctioned states avenues to challenge unlawful measures and to seek accountability. International law recognizes the right of states to invoke responsibility where obligations are breached, and human rights treaties and multilateral agreements provide substantive legal grounds for such claims (1, 2).

On the other hand, numerous obstacles complicate the pursuit of legal remedies. These include jurisdictional limitations, evidentiary difficulties in demonstrating harm, political resistance by respondent states, and persistent problems related to the enforcement of judicial decisions. The economic and political power of sanctioning states often undermines the practical effectiveness of rulings, even when legal violations are established (29). Additional challenges arise from the lengthy duration and high costs of international litigation, as well as from the complex legal justifications often invoked to defend sanctions on security grounds (30).

Despite these difficulties, the existence of legal capacities to challenge unilateral sanctions remains significant. Addressing the associated challenges requires strategic legal planning, strengthened domestic and international legal institutions, and enhanced international cooperation aimed at building consensus around the protection of human rights and the rule of law. Ultimately, developing coherent and enforceable legal responses to unilateral

sanctions is essential for upholding justice, equality, and legitimacy in the contemporary international legal order (10).

Conclusion

International sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly in connection with its nuclear activities, constitute one of the most salient contemporary challenges confronting international law. While the United Nations Charter and foundational instruments of international law permit the use of sanctions only under narrowly defined conditions aimed at preserving international peace and security, Iran's experience illustrates that many sanctions have been applied outside these legitimate frameworks and have primarily served the political objectives of powerful states. This situation raises fundamental concerns regarding the legal legitimacy of sanctions and highlights the persistent tension between the normative principles of international law and the political interests of dominant actors in the international system.

Analysis of nuclear-related sanctions against Iran demonstrates that, despite Iran's membership in the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and its recognized right to pursue peaceful nuclear energy, the UN Security Council at various stages adopted binding resolutions that imposed extensive restrictions on Iran's nuclear activities. These developments became even more contentious following the imposition of unilateral sanctions by the United States and its allies, which intensified economic and political pressure beyond the multilateral framework. From the standpoint of international law, unilateral sanctions imposed without Security Council authorization possess limited legal legitimacy and are widely viewed as incompatible with the principles of non-intervention and the sovereign equality of states.

The overall findings indicate that nuclear sanctions against Iran have been shaped largely by political calculations and power dynamics rather than by objective and consistent legal standards. Moreover, the consequences of these sanctions extend well beyond the economic sphere, producing significant political and legal effects on Iran's standing in the international system. In response, Iran has sought to assert its rights through legal and diplomatic avenues, emphasizing peaceful nuclear development and engaging in negotiated arrangements such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. These efforts demonstrate that legal frameworks and diplomacy remain viable tools for reducing tensions and mitigating the effects of sanctions when they are pursued in good faith.

Legal Recommendations

1. **Strengthening legal advocacy in international forums:** Iran should more actively utilize international judicial and quasi-judicial mechanisms, including the International Court of Justice, to challenge the legality and legitimacy of unilateral sanctions.
2. **Activating human rights mechanisms:** Nuclear-related sanctions that produce direct and indirect harm to economic and social rights can be addressed through human rights frameworks, particularly where they resemble forms of collective punishment.
3. **Expanding legal diplomacy:** Cooperation with allied states and regional or multilateral groupings can enhance Iran's legal discourse internationally and reduce legal and political isolation.
4. **Developing domestic legal resilience:** Establishing coordinated national legal strategies to respond to sanctions can reinforce internal coherence and strengthen Iran's position in international legal and diplomatic arenas.

5. **Invoking the right to development:** Framing sanctions as incompatible with the right to development can highlight their broader impact on national welfare, progress, and long-term stability.

In sum, nuclear sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran are not merely a political dispute but a significant test for the credibility and effectiveness of international law itself. Iran's experience illustrates how interpretative ambiguities and enforcement asymmetries can weaken the authority of international legal norms when confronted by powerful states. Nevertheless, sustained and strategic engagement with legal instruments and institutions offers a pathway for challenging, delegitimizing, and ultimately reshaping the use of sanctions within the international legal order.

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All authors equally contributed to this study.

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Transparency of Data

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