We want to discuss the issue of sanctions and how sanctions contribute to the repression of civil society and moderate forces in Iran. Economic sanctions targeting the nuclear program have given rise to a new class of corrupt and wealthy middle men in Iran. They are aligned with the most conservative groups who see their interests in Iran’s isolation from the international community.

In fact, sanctions have weakened the Iranian middle class and Iranians are experiencing rapid social decline. For example, because of economic pressures, the middle class—that had been the engine of change and progress—is no longer able to engage in civil society. The already-weak private sector has been destroyed over the past few years as a result of sanctions policy. This includes trade organizations, dairy farms, and medicine factories. The most vulnerable groups, including women, children, and refugees, have become more marginalized. Poverty is at an all-time high, child marriage has increased, divorce is on the rise, and the availability of basic health services and medicines is a major problem. People are dying as a result of the sanctions.

Civil society has been isolated and weakened due to sanctions as well, allowing those who promote intolerance and violence to take center stage. Much of this violence is directed at women. In 2014 we witnessed a series of acid attacks against women in the city of Isfahan. The public was appalled and thousands of men and women protested across the country, demanding security for citizens. Women’s groups are working against all odds to hold the government accountable to ensure the protection of women’s rights and human rights, and maintain minimum space for civil society activism.

We want the international community to end broad economic sanctions. Unlike what the international community claims, economic sanctions impact most severely the Iranian population not the State. In fact sanctions strengthen groups who see their power in isolation and continued conflict with the international community. We want the normalization of relations with the West, but not without the engagement of civil society and accountability on the part of the Iranian state to live up to its international obligations to respect human rights for all, regardless of gender, religion, and ethnicity.