

JustComment

www.erc.org.au

A joint publication of Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education &
The School of Education, Australian Catholic University

Sanctions: invisible, silent, deadly

Repeat of History

The quest to bring the Iran to its knees by the USA (and Australia) has been accelerated by the imposition of sanctions where ordinary Iranians are increasingly caught in the crosshairs¹.

The US President has been urged to use diplomacy rather than using sanctions that are likely to backfire². Sanctions actually lead to increased repression and corruption as well as sow the seeds of further alienation between the people of Iran and the United States.

Australia joined with the United States in imposing sanctions against Iran with the aim of preventing it from acquiring nuclear weapons.

The US President signed on to a round of sanctions against Iran in January 2013. The new policies are closer to a true trade embargo, designed to systematically attack and undercut Iran's major financial pillars and threaten the country with economic collapse³ and make the economy 'scream'³.

Sanctions as an Alternative to War

Sanctions are not an alternative to war. They seem invisible, but their effects are highly visible. Deliberately crippling a nation's economy is nothing less than war⁴. From 1990 to 2003, the sanctions in Iraq were the most comprehensive and devastating ever established in the name of international governance. The 1991 bombing campaign and sanctions brought Iraq's infrastructure to near collapse as well as compromising basic living conditions⁵. Though labelled as humanitarian, they were a humanitarian catastrophe.

'Targeted' Sanctions

It is not true that sanctions are 'targeted.' The true nature of so-called 'targeted' sanctions in Iran was revealed before the escalation of sanctions. U.S. and European Union sanctions 'seriously endangered the lives of tens of thousands of patients, particularly children, suffering from special diseases.'⁶

The UN Secretary General wrote that, 'The sanctions imposed on... Iran have had significant effects on the general population, including an escalation in inflation, a rise in commodities and energy costs, an increase in the rate of unemployment and a shortage of necessary items, including medicine' and harmed its humanitarian operations⁷. Foreign medicines needed for Iranians living with cancer, haemophilia, thalassemia, kidney problems and other diseases were no longer available⁸.

Another report⁹ also noted that 'millions of lives are at risk in Iran because western economic sanctions are hitting the importing of medicines and hospital equipment.' Many will recall Madeleine Albright's affirmation as US Secretary of State¹⁰ that U.S. policy objectives in Iraq were worth sacrificing half a million Arab children!! The question remains as to who is listening as ordinary Iranians now, as in Iraq, are treated as so-called legitimate targets; as innocent people have food taken from their mouths and have medicines denied them.

Assault on Defiance

Noam Chomsky refers to the mafia principle¹¹ operating in U.S. foreign policy where 'defiance' under any circumstances is not tolerated. This



principle was operating in Iran when the Shah of Iran, a US ally and puppet was overthrown. It happened with Saddam Hussein. This is something that Venezuela as well knows all too well!! There is a heavy price to pay for the crimes of defiance and national independence¹².

Sanctions on Iraq

The sanctions imposed on Iraq (1990 to 2003) were so comprehensive and devastating that brought about the near collapse of Iraq's infrastructure and threatened the basic conditions necessary to sustain life¹³. Critical humanitarian goods were prevented from entering the country. These deliberate US policies ensured the continuation of Iraq's catastrophic condition which Australia and the United Kingdom collaborated in.

For 13 years anything related to electricity, telecommunications, and transportation could not be imported; requisites for agriculture and housing construction were blocked; and equipment and materials needed for health care and food preparation were denied. Glue, water pipes, water

tankers, thermos flasks, ambulance radios and irrigation equipment were blocked in case they were used for nefarious purposes. To prevent the possible production of biological and chemical weapons, all science education above the secondary school level ceased. This ridiculous scenario meant that yogurt and cheese could not be produced and eggs were eliminated due to the remote danger that egg yolks might be used to grow viruses, and thus for biological weapons¹⁴. The policy that justified sanctions exceeded any rational concern with security. It reduced Iraq to the most primitive possible condition. The sanity and legality of reducing a nation to a preindustrial state and bankrupting it for the purpose of containing a tyrant was rarely questioned.

Morality of Sanctions

Sanctions against Iran have not achieved the objectives intended, except as a stand-in for military action by the United States or Israel¹⁵. Sanctions may actually have assisted Iran's regime to implement economic reforms that would have been otherwise difficult¹⁶.

Sanctions have served multiple purposes: to uphold democracy, protect human rights, reverse armed aggression and prevent weapons proliferation. The conventional belief is that they are mostly symbolic and have little practical impact; that they placate public demands for action but do not achieve real results¹⁷. All sanctions have severe humanitarian and social consequences; foster black market criminality (often controlled by state forces or paramilitary groups; harm the very constituencies within a country that were most supportive of advancing human rights norms; strengthen the repressive forces against which sanctions are supposedly aimed without achieved the desired political changes. Sanctions must avoid generating new humanitarian crises¹⁸.

Toward 'Sanctions Reform'

UN humanitarian agencies have called for social impact assessments before sanctions are imposed. They emphasise the need for targeted sanctions that deny decision-making elites access to specific financial and other resources whilst avoiding harm to innocent or vulnerable populations, e.g., the freezing of assets and blocking of financial transactions; arms and military technology embargoes; and travel sanctions, including visa restrictions on designated individuals and aviation sanctions against specific countries or territories.

Sanctions work best as instruments of persuasion, not punishment. Whilst not able to achieve major objectives such as regime change, they can impose sufficient pressure to cause a regime to evaluate the costs and benefits of pursuing policies the international community condemns. Concessions by a target regime should be rewarded with an easing of coercive pressure; partial compliance should be met by a partial lifting of sanctions.

The more effective and ethical approach would be to reciprocate concessions, combining sanctions with incentives as part of a bargaining dynamic to resolve an impasse. Such an approach combines effectiveness with ethics in ways that can sustain moral sanctions.

As a strategy the practices and standards for their use need substantial reform. Greater effort is needed to assess and mitigate the potential humanitarian consequences of sanctions. Pressure should be applied against decision-making elites, rather than vulnerable populations. Sanctions need to be seen as tools of coercive diplomacy designed to resolve conflict, not punishment. With such reforms, sanctions are more likely to be effective and result in political gain and be more ethical with less civilian pain.

Ethical Considerations

Joy Gordon has warned about the future use—and misuse—of sanctions which in Iraq saw a willingness to see appalling things done in the name of security. 'We must come to grips with the perversity of this. It is simply not good enough to say that atrocities committed for the right reasons, or by respected international organizations, are not really atrocities after all.'¹⁹ She cites Israel's pettiness that now allows potato chips into Gaza as they no longer pose a security threat to Israel²⁰.

Because economic sanctions are intended to inflict great human suffering, pain, harm, and even death and thus should be subject to the same kind of careful moral and ethical scrutiny given to the use of military force before it is chosen as a means to achieve national political objectives.' And 'because sanctions are themselves a form of violence, they cannot legitimately be seen merely as a peacekeeping device, or as a tool for enforcing international law... They require the same level of justification as other acts of warfare'.²¹

Conclusion

The sanctions imposed on Iraq violated both the criteria that must be met before going to war, such as just cause and the probability of success, and the criteria for how the war is conducted, employing such norms as proportionality and discrimination,' which bars directly intended attacks on non-combatants and non-combatant targets.

The comprehensive economic sanctions also employed against Haiti in 1991 and Cuba since the 1960s, as in Iraq in 1990, have failed to achieve their goals while at the same imposing devastating hardships on the civilian population.

Sanctions are 'a form of violence – no less than guns and bombs'.

Full set of resources and references are on the ERC website www.erc.org.au



Edmund Rice Centre
AWARENESS • ADVOCACY • ACTION

15 Henley Road, Homebush West
(near Flemington Station)
Phone (02) 8762 4200
Fax (02) 8762 4220
Email johns@erc.org.au
Web www.erc.org.au

 **ACU National**
Australian Catholic University
Brisbane Sydney Canberra Ballarat Melbourne

179 Albert Rd, Strathfield 2135
Phone (02) 9739 2100
Fax (02) 02 9739 2105

This material is the sole property of the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice & Community Education and the School of Education of the Australian Catholic University. Reproduction is not permitted without the permission of these organisations.