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Fact Sheet

Sanctions: The Good, The Bad, and the Criminal

Didn't boycotts and sanctions help end apartheid in South Africa and challenge it in Israel?

Didn't sanctions result in huge numbers of deaths in Iraq?

Are sanctions a noble tool of nonviolent activism for peace and justice and an admirable substitute for war? Or are sanctions an illegal mass-murderous partner of war?

Yes! But we need to pay some attention to the details.

A huge portion of the public in South Africa favored the sanctioning of the Apartheid government. That sanctioning did not originate abroad. And it was aimed, where possible, at the government, not the public. It was also aimed at an achievable and just change, namely the ending of Apartheid, not the submittal of South Africa to domination by a foreign power or set of powerful institutions. The Apartheid government had a clear path toward ending the boycott and finally chose to take it. The situation with Israel is not identical, but BDS (boycott, divestment, and sanctions) is supported by many in Palestine and shows potential.

Fact sheets on U.S. sanctions on [Iraq](#), [Cuba](#), and [North Korea](#) illustrate some of the problems with sanctions imposed from without, aimed at entire populations, and used to pressure nations to submit to foreign domination. The results, as documented in those fact sheets, are horrendous suffering and death that can apparently continue indefinitely without any other "success" on the sanctions' own terms. In some cases, including Iraq, the goals of the sanctions have been met to the extent that they included weakening a nation in preparation for attacking it militarily, demonizing a nation in preparation for attacking it militarily, and generating semi-plausible claims of a legal basis for the crime of attacking it militarily.



Photo by Jeremy L. Wood

Are Sanctions Legal?

The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World by Scott Shapiro and Oona Hathaway describes the changes brought about in the 20th century by the Kellogg-Briand Pact, the League of Nations, and the United Nations Charter. Where it was once legal to start or join a war (and loot or pillage) but illegal to impose economic sanctions, this situation was reversed. But not just any sanctions are legal. Sanctions authorized by the United Nations and not punishing a whole population may be legal. Sanctions imposed by a single government or group of governments, or engaging in collective punishment, or coercing other governments to participate in a form of blockade are not legal. Such sanctions violate national sovereignty and bans on collective punishment in the Geneva Conventions as well as the UN Charter, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and in some cases the Genocide Convention.

Are Sanctions Moral?

Advocates of peace [sometimes debate](#) the proper design of sanctions in somewhat imperialist terms. Do the sanctions coerce a nation into actions that seem less warlike, at least in the short term? Or do they generate more warfare by the targeted nation? These are important considerations, but not to the exclusion of the human and environmental damage directly caused by the sanctions, the impact of the sanctions on the status of international law, and the long-term consequences in hostility, blowback, and distrust.

David Cortright [writes](#): “Policy makers seem to have forgotten the reasons for shifting to targeted sanctions. The purpose is not only to avoid unintended humanitarian consequences but to minimize the risk of a rally-round-the-flag effect. When sanctions harm the innocent they lose legitimacy and political support. Governments under blanket sanctions can blame their country’s economic and social miseries on external enemies, diverting attention from their own mismanagement. They can isolate domestic opponents by accusing them of helping foreign enemies. . . . The sanctions adopted by the UN Security Council are more selective and targeted. They freeze the assets and ban the travel of approximately 100 Iranian officials and entities responsible for the country’s nuclear program. They do not hurt ordinary people. . . . Sanctions that target potential bomb makers are smart. Those that harm innocent civilians are counterproductive and should be abandoned.”

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