



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Sanctions: The Cruel and Brutal War against the Iraqi People, Part 2

by Jacob G. Hornberger

By 1996, an increasing number of people were speaking out against the sanctions against Iraq, which motivated U.S. officials to embrace a diplomatic fig leaf that would protect them from adverse public opinion while, at the same time, enabling them to continue their cruel and brutal policy against the Iraqi people. That was when the infamous “oil for food” program was implemented.

An implicit acknowledgement of the desperate plight of the Iraqi people, the ostensible purpose of the oil-for-food program was to provide a minimal, still small, caloric intake for the average person. Given that its setup and operation were based on an almost-perfect model of socialistic central planning, however, it shouldn’t have surprised anyone that the program failed to significantly alleviate the plight of the Iraqi people. What it did do though is provide U.S. officials with an opportunity to proclaim how good and caring they were to the Iraqi people.

Referring to the oil-for-food program, Joy Gordon wrote in her excellent *Harper’s* article (November 2002), “[Cool War: Economic Sanctions as a Weapon of Mass Destruction](#),”

Since the program began, Iraq has earned approximately \$57 billion in oil revenues, of which it has spent about \$23 billion on goods that actually arrived. This comes to about \$170 per year per person, which is less than one half the annual per capita income of Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

More important, the Iraqi children continued to die of malnutrition and disease. According to the Campaign Against Sanctions on Iraq (CASI), Tun Myat, the UN coordinator in Iraq, stated in October 2000,

The food distribution system ... now ensures that under the new Distribution Plan over 2,470 kilocalories of energy of food is being made available to every man, woman and child in the country ... but the fact is, of course, people have become so poor, in some cases, that they can’t even afford to eat

the food that they've been given free because for many of them, the food ration represents the major part of their income ... they have to sell it in order to buy clothes and shoes or hats or whatever other things that they would require. So the sort of upturn in nutrition that we would all want to be seeing is not happening.

According to CASI,

In his June 2000 report, the UN Secretary-General wrote that "clean water and reliable electrical supply are of paramount importance to the welfare of the Iraqi people" (§98). Such basic needs have not been provided by the imports allowed to Iraq under oil for food. In November 2002 the Secretary-General noted that "access to potable water is insufficient in both quantity and quality, and in many cases the water and sanitation networks remain in a poor state of repair. On top of this an estimated 500,000 metric tons of solid raw or partially raw sewage is discharged daily into the two rivers, which are the main source of water."

"Oh, but it's not our fault that those children are dying of infectious diseases," U.S. officials continually cried, "because medicines aren't prohibited by the sanctions." Their cries were a sham and a lie, for they knew full well that the medicines that made their way into Iraq were totally inadequate to treat the ever-growing numbers of children infected by what would ordinarily have been treatable diseases. The CASI website points to a devastating 1999 UN Security Council report on the sanctions that concludes,

In marked contrast to the prevailing situation prior to the events of 1990-91, the infant mortality rates in Iraq today are among the highest in the world, low infant birth weight affects at least 23% of all births, chronic malnutrition affects every fourth child under five years of age, only 41% of the population have regular access to clean water, 83% of all schools need substantial repairs. The ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] states that the Iraqi health-care system is today in a decrepit state. UNDP [the United Nations Development Programme] [calculates](#) that it would take 7 billion U.S. dollars to rehabilitate the power sector countrywide to its 1990 capacity.

Moreover, if U.S. officials were as concerned about helping the Iraqi people with medicines as they claim they were, then why would they make it a criminal offense for physicians to travel to Iraq with medicines to give to the Iraqi people? Indeed, why did U.S. officials file a complaint against the humanitarian group Voices in the Wilderness as late as June 2003 for delivering medicines to the Iraqi people in 1998?

Further, as Gordon pointed out in her *Harper's* article, even as U.S. officials were trying to blame the deaths and destruction on Saddam Hussein, they were playing cute but deadly games with the bureaucratic power they wielded to veto purchase requests by Iraqi officials:

[The United States] has sometimes given a reason for its refusal to approve humanitarian goods, sometimes given no reason at all, and sometimes changed its reason three or four times, in each instance causing a delay of months. Since August 1991 the United States has blocked most purchases of materials necessary for Iraq to generate electricity, as well as equipment for radio, telephone, and other communications. Often restrictions have hinged on the withholding of a single essential element, rendering many approved items useless. For example, Iraq was allowed to purchase a sewage-treatment plant but was blocked from buying the generator necessary to run it; this in a country that has been pouring 300,000 tons of raw sewage daily into its rivers.

Consequences of sanctions

Ironically, while the purpose of the sanctions was to squeeze the Iraqi people into ousting Saddam Hussein from power, the perverse result was the exact opposite. A February 2003 *Washington Post* article entitled “Stockpiling Popularity with Food” by Rajiv Chandrasekaran pointed out in excruciating detail how the sanctions actually increased Saddam’s control over the Iraqi people through the extensive food-rationing programs that he implemented soon after the sanctions were imposed in 1991.

Many Americans remain blissfully unaware of the death and destruction the U.S. government wrought for 12 years in the name of ousting Saddam Hussein from power and in the name of dismantling his much-vaunted and much-feared weapons of mass destruction. But the rest of the world was fully aware of what the U.S. government was doing to the Iraqi people.

For example, in 1998 Denis Halliday, the UN official in charge of the oil-for-food program, resigned his 30-year position with the UN in protest against the sanctions, branding them as a “totally bankrupt concept” and incompatible with the UN Charter as well as UN conventions on human rights and the rights of the child.

Halliday’s resignation was followed two years later by that of Hans von Sponeck, the highest-ranking UN humanitarian official in Baghdad, who declared, “Every year that passes, every month that passes, sees the intensity of the sanctions on the lives of the people here increase.”

The following is an excerpt from a [1998 BBC article](#) discussing Halliday’s resignation:

Mr. Halliday said it was correct to draw attention to the “4,000 to 5,000 children dying unnecessarily every month due to the impact of sanctions because of the breakdown of water and sanitation, inadequate diet and the bad internal health situation.” But he said sanctions were biting into the

fabric of Iraqi society in other, less visible ways. He cited the disruption of family life caused by the departure overseas of two to three million Iraqi professionals. He said sanctions had increased divorces and reduced the number of marriages because young couples could not afford to wed. "It has also produced a new level of crime, street children, possibly even an increase in prostitution," he said. "This is a town where people used to leave the key in the front door, leave their cars unlocked, where crime was almost unknown. We have, through the sanctions, really disrupted this quality of life, the standard of behaviour that was common in Iraq before."

Two years later, von Sponeck said,

Today, with an unemployment rate that is estimated at between 60 and 75 percent, people depend on what is given to them and that is humiliating and it does not make for a future of self-reliance based on your efforts to earn in a dignified way a living.

More ominous was the following statement by Halliday that was the concluding paragraph in the 1998 BBC article:

It is not well understood as a possible spin-off of the sanctions regime. We are pushing people to take extreme positions.

That's undoubtedly why U.S. officials were so convinced that Iraq had something to do with the September 11 attacks. They knew that after more than a decade of brutal sanctions against Iraq, Iraqi officials and the Iraqi people had the most compelling motive to retaliate against both the civilian and military population of the United States. In the halls of Washington governmental offices on the afternoon of September 11, 2001, the families of hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqi children were undoubtedly likely suspects in the attacks that took place in New York and Washington.

While Americans might not have been aware of the 12 years of death and destruction that the sanctions were producing for the Iraqi people, everyone in the Arab world was fully aware of the sanctions' consequences. And while there was certainly no love for Saddam Hussein among many Arabs, there was tremendous sympathy and empathy for the Iraqi people. Year after year, Arabs seethed with anger and hatred over what the U.S. government was doing to the Iraqi people, which is one big reason that the September 11 suicide bombers came from countries all over the Middle East.

When U.S. Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright, who later would be confirmed by the U.S. Senate as secretary of state, was asked by *60 Minutes* whether the deaths of half a million

Iraqi children had been “worth it,” her response — “I think that is a very hard choice, but the price, we think, the price is worth it” — reverberated throughout the Middle East.

While Albright is now claiming in her new book that she just made an honest mistake in answering that way, the fact is that her answer perfectly reflected the cruel and brutal mindset of her fellow officials in the U.S. government — the people who knowingly and intentionally instituted and maintained what the State Department had called the “toughest, most comprehensive sanctions in history.” That’s undoubtedly why they chose silence in the face of Albright’s shameful statement rather than condemnation or criticism.

Unfortunately, the people who are responsible for implementing and maintaining the sanctions against the Iraqi people for so long will never be called to account for what they have done. The people who paid the price for their cruelty and brutality were the victims of the September 11 terrorist attacks. The best thing Americans could ever do to honor their memory is to permanently prohibit the U.S. government from ever again utilizing economic sanctions and embargoes as tools of foreign policy.

Jacob Hornberger is founder and president of The Future of Freedom Foundation.

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