



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

[fff@fff.org](mailto:fff@fff.org) [www.fff.org](http://www.fff.org)

## **Iraq after the Gulf War Sanctions, Part 1** **by Rahul Mahajan**

*I am willing to make a bet to anyone here that we care more about the Iraqi people than Saddam Hussein does.* — U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, CNN Town Hall Meeting, Columbus, Ohio, February 18, 1998

*We have heard that a half million children have died. I mean, that's more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?* — Lesley Stahl on UN sanctions against Iraq, *60 Minutes*, May 12, 1996

*I think this is a very hard choice, but the price — we think the price is worth it.* — U.S. Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright replying

While inspections continued, a far more compelling and significant drama was playing out — the progressive deterioration and destruction of an entire society.

The mainstream U.S. discourse about sanctions on Iraq has generally oscillated between the two poles marked out by the above statements of Madeleine Albright — a hard-nosed assessment that U.S. policy objectives are more important than the deaths of children (rarely so honestly stated), and sanctimony about the great U.S. government concern for the Iraqi people combined with crocodile tears about Saddam Hussein's cruelty (which few people contest). Just as the big question with regard to inspections was "Why doesn't he just cooperate and get sanctions lifted?" the big questions regarding sanctions include "Why did he wait so long before agreeing to the Oil for Food program?" and "Why did he spend the money on palaces and weapons instead of feeding his people?"

Let's start by noting that the term "sanctions" is itself highly misleading. The United States has levied unilateral sanctions on hundreds of occasions. The United Nations has authorized sanctions on 14 different occasions. Never, however, have there been such comprehensive international restrictions on all exports and imports as were imposed on Iraq after the Gulf War;

never have prohibitions on imports been enforced by attaching a country's entire foreign earnings and placing them in a closely monitored bank account, with numerous bureaucratic impediments to disbursement of funds. The confusion engendered by the term is exemplified in a particularly fatuous statement by Marc Cooper, one of an emerging group of self-appointed spokesmen for the anti-war movement. In an article lamenting the stupidity of said movement, he suggests that the Left "must get its story straight on sanctions" — how can it oppose those on Iraq when "the entire American Left supported similar painful sanctions against the apartheid state of South Africa?"

Of course, in South Africa, the African National Congress, the mass movement representing those who would be hardest hit by sanctions, called for them. But even more important are the dramatic differences in the actual sanctions: Just imagine the response had anyone suggested that South Africa be ringed by a naval blockade; that it be denied the right to export anything for years and when it did, that all its foreign earnings be seized and held, with disbursement of funds for medicine and essential civilian infrastructure such as water treatment regularly blocked or delayed; and that all this be done after the country had been bombed into rubble.

When you've got the story straight, the sanctions on Iraq emerge as one of the worst horrors of our time.

### **Brief historical review of the sanctions**

Within months after the end of the Gulf War, numerous reports indicated a catastrophe in the making. In April, the Harvard Study Team, a group of doctors and social scientists, predicted that unless something was done, "at least 170,000 children under five years of age will die in the coming year from the delayed effects of the Gulf Crisis." A similar report issued in March by UN Undersecretary General Martti Ahtisaari said that the Gulf War had inflicted "near-apocalyptic results," and predicted "imminent catastrophe."

By 1994, with its industrial base in ruins and devoid of any outside income, Iraq was in the grip of widespread, severe malnutrition. In 1996, the Oil for Food (OFF) program was instituted. Initially, it allowed Iraq to sell \$4 billion worth of oil per year. Later, the cap on sales was raised to \$10.5 billion and in December 1999 it was eliminated entirely. Of that money, initially 30 percent and more recently 25 percent was taken for the UN Compensation Fund, intended to compensate victims of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Its largest beneficiaries have been oil companies, including the Kuwait Petroleum Company, which was awarded damages of \$15.9 billion. Another 3 to 4 percent went for UN administrative expenses, including those of the weapons inspectors.

All of the money Iraq got for selling its oil through the program was deposited in a bank account in New York, and funds were disbursed only to meet contracts with foreign corporations that were approved by the Sanctions Committee, each member of which could delay or put on

hold any contract, without giving any reason. The situation improved only with the passage in May 2002 of UNSCR 1409, which allowed for all goods except those on a special Goods Review List to be automatically approved.

Oil for Food goods started entering Iraq in March 1997. As of February 21, 2003, \$43 billion worth of goods had been approved for import, but only \$26.6 billion had actually entered Iraq through the program. Between March 1997 and January 2002, the average rate of entry of goods was about \$14–\$15 per month per person, and since then it has only been roughly double that.

Needless to say, this was never enough. In May 1997, UNICEF released a finding, based on studies of 15,000 Iraqi children, that 27.5 percent of children were malnourished, noting that if the condition persisted past the age of two, effects were “difficult to reverse” and “damage to the child’s development [was] likely to be permanent.” Over the course of the sanctions, adult literacy declined from 80 percent to 58 percent and child literacy similarly — something seen in no other country during the 1990s, not even the countries of sub-Saharan Africa being ravaged by AIDS.

Numerous estimates of child deaths due to sanctions have been made, but by far the most authoritative study — and the only one involving independent new data — was done by UNICEF in 1999. Based on a survey of nearly 24,000 households, it concluded that for central and south Iraq the under-age-5 mortality rate averaged 56 out of 1,000 in the period from 1984 to 1989 and 131 out of 1,000 from 1994 to 1999 — an increase of more than 130 percent. Comparing mortality during the sanctions with an extrapolated trend line, it estimated 500,000 excess deaths of children under the age of five from 1991 to 1998. It was careful not to attribute all of them to sanctions. However, the devastation caused by the Gulf War and the sanctions, regarded as a unit, must necessarily account for the vast majority of those deaths; they are the primary things that changed between the 1980s and the 1990s.

The usual response from the U.S. government when confronted with these numbers is both to deny the numbers and to claim that the deaths are Saddam Hussein’s fault.

Some of the claims are transparent falsehoods, such as the one that billions in Oil for Food (OFF) funds were diverted to military purchases (not possible because the money never entered Iraq, but was disbursed only for approved purchases). Another problem constantly cited was the president’s building of palaces and mosques. Although Saddam’s extravagance was never in doubt, again, OFF money simply could not be used for this; furthermore, the total expenditure involved was minuscule as a percentage of national income.

Another objection, which has some merit, is that at times Iraq spent a great deal of money on sophisticated medical equipment (such as MRI machines) to provide high-quality care to the wealthy, while government hospitals were pitifully short of needles, antibiotics, and other basic goods. It’s true that the OFF money could at least theoretically be better spent, not by the huge

margin that proponents of the sanctions like to suggest, but certainly significantly. Still, this objection rings very false.

*Rahul Mahajan has been to occupied Iraq twice and reported from the first siege of Fallujah. He publishes the blog [EmpireNotes.org](http://EmpireNotes.org). This excerpt is adapted from his book *Full Spectrum Dominance: U.S. Power in Iraq and Beyond*. Copyright (c) 2003 by Rahul Mahajan. Reprinted with the permission of the author and [Seven Stories Press](http://SevenStoriesPress.com).*

**This article was originally published in the November 2007 edition of *Freedom Daily*..**